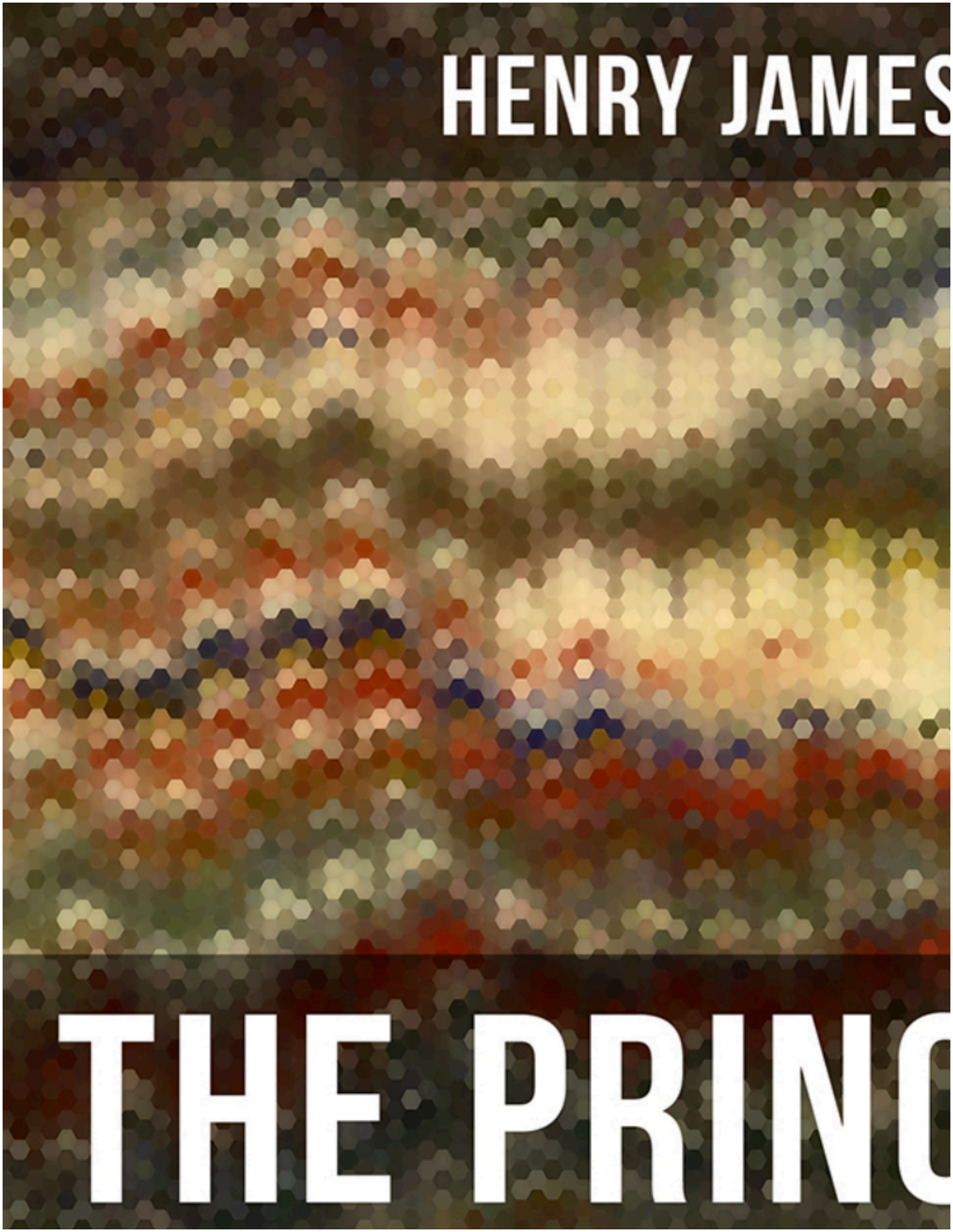

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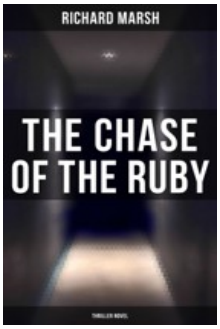
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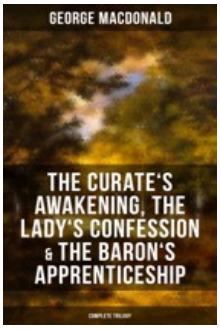
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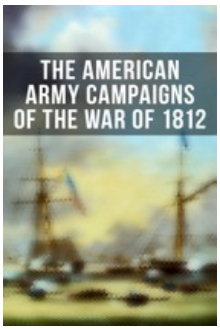
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Center of Military History, John R. Maass, Steven J. Rauch:
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Book First

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Chapter I

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“OH, YES, I dare say I can find the child, if you would like to see him,” Miss Pynsent said; she had a fluttering wish to assent to every suggestion made by her visitor, whom she regarded as a high and rather terrible personage. To look for the little boy, she came out of her small parlor, which she had been ashamed to exhibit in so untidy a state, with paper “patterns” lying about on the furniture, and snippings of stuff scattered over the carpet — she came out of this somewhat stuffy sanctuary, dedicated at once to social intercourse and to the ingenious art to which her life had been devoted, and, opening the house-door, turned her eyes up and down the little street. It would presently be teatime, and she knew that at that solemn hour Hyacinth narrowed the circle of his wanderings. She was anxious and impatient, and in a little fever of excitement and complacency, not wanting to keep Mrs. Bowerbank waiting, though she sat there, heavily and consideringly, as if she meant to stay; and wondering not a little whether the object of her quest would have a dirty face. Mrs. Bowerbank had intimated so definitely that she thought it remarkable on Miss Pynsent’s part to have taken care of him, gratuitously, for so many years, that the little dressmaker, whose imagination took flights about every one but herself, and who had never been conscious of an exemplary benevolence, suddenly aspired to appear, throughout, as devoted to the child as she had struck her solemn, substantial guest as being, and felt how much she should like him to come in fresh and frank, and looking as pretty as he sometimes did. Miss Pynsent, who blinked confusedly as she surveyed the outer prospect, was very much flushed, partly with the agitation of what Mrs. Bowerbank had told her, and partly because, when she offered that lady a drop of something refreshing, at the end of so long an expedition, she had said she couldn’t think of touching anything unless Miss Pynsent would keep her company. The chiffonier (as Amanda was always careful to call it), beside the fireplace, yielded up a small bottle which had formerly contained eau-de-cologne, and which now exhibited half a pint of a rich gold-colored liquid. Miss Pynsent was very delicate; she lived on tea and watercress, and she kept the little bottle in the chiffonier only for great emergencies. She didn’t like hot brandy and water, with a lump or two of sugar, but she partook of half a tumbler on the present occasion, which was of a highly exceptional kind. At this time of day the boy was often planted in front of the little sweet-shop on the other side of the street, an establishment where periodical literature as well as tough toffy and hard lollipops was dispensed, and where song-books and pictorial sheets were attractively exhibited in the small-paned, dirty window. He used to stand there for half an hour at a time, spelling out the first pages of the romances in the Family Herald and the London Journal, and admiring the obligatory illustration, in which the noble characters (they were always of the highest birth) were presented to the carnal eye. When he had a penny he spent only a fraction of it on stale sugar-candy; with the remaining halfpenny he always bought a ballad, with a vivid woodcut at the top. Now, however, he was not at his post of contemplation; nor was he visible anywhere to Miss Pynsent’s impatient glance.

“Millicent Henning, tell me quickly, have you seen my child?” These words were addressed by Miss Pynsent to a little girl who sat on the doorstep of the adjacent house, nursing a dingy doll, and who had an extraordinary luxuriance of dark brown hair, surmounted by a torn straw hat. Miss Pynsent pronounced her name Enning.

The child looked up from her dandling and twitching, and after a stare of which the blankness was somewhat exaggerated, replied: “Law no, Miss Pynsent, I never see him.”

“Aren’t you always messing about with him, you naughty little girl?” the dressmaker returned, with sharpness. “Isn’t he round the corner, playing marbles, or — or some jumping game?” Miss Pynsent went on, trying to be suggestive.

“I assure you, he never plays nothing,” said Millicent Henning, with a mature manner, which she bore out by adding, “And I don’t know why I should be called naughty, neither.”

“Well, if you want to be called good, please go and find him, and tell him there’s a lady here come on purpose to see him, this very instant.” Miss Pynsent waited a moment, to see if her injunction would be obeyed, but she got no satisfaction beyond another gaze of deliberation, which made her feel that the child’s perversity was as great as the beauty, somewhat soiled and dimmed, of her insolent little face. She turned back into the house, with an exclamation of despair, and as soon as she had disappeared, Millicent Henning sprang erect and began to race down the street in the direction of another, which crossed it. I take no unfair advantage of the innocence of childhood in saying that the motive of this young lady’s flight was not a desire to be agreeable to Miss Pynsent, but an extreme curiosity on the subject of the visitor who wanted to see Hyacinth Robinson. She wished to participate, if only in imagination, in the interview that might take place, and she was moved also by a quick revival of friendly feeling for the boy, from whom she had parted only half

an hour before with considerable asperity. She was not a very clinging little creature, and there was no one in her own domestic circle to whom she was much attached; but she liked to kiss Hyacinth when he didn't push her away and tell her she was tiresome. It was in this action and epithet he had indulged half an hour ago; but she had reflected rapidly (while she stared at Miss Pynsent) that this was the worst he had ever done. Millicent Henning was only eight years of age, but she knew there was worse in the world than that.

Mrs. Bowerbank, in a leisurely, roundabout way, wandered off to her sister, Mrs. Chipperfield, whom she had come into that part of the world to see, and the whole history of the dropsical tendencies of whose husband, an undertaker with a business that had been a blessing because you could always count on it, she unfolded to Miss Pynsent between the sips of a second glass. She was a high - shouldered, towering woman, and suggested squareness as well as a pervasion of the upper air, so that Amanda reflected that she must be very difficult to fit, and had a sinking at the idea of the number of pins she would take. Her sister had nine children and she herself had seven, the eldest of whom she left in charge of the others when she went to her service. She was on duty at the prison only during the day; she had to be there at seven in the morning, but she got her evenings at home, quite regular and comfortable. Miss Pynsent thought it wonderful she could talk of comfort in such a life as that, but could easily imagine she should be glad to get away at night, for at that time the place must be much more terrible.

"And aren't you afraid of them — ever?" she inquired, looking up at her visitor, with her little, heated face.

Mrs. Bowerbank was very slew, and considered her so long before replying that she felt herself to be, in an alarming degree, in the eye of the law; for who could be more closely connected with the administration of justice than a female turnkey, especially so big and majestic a one?" I expect they are more afraid of me," she replied at last; and it was an idea into which Miss Pynsent could easily enter.

"And at night I suppose they rave quite awful," the little dressmaker suggested, feeling vaguely that prisons and madhouses came very much to the same.

"Well, if they do, we hush 'em up," Mrs. Bowerbank remarked, rather portentously; while Miss Pynsent fidgeted to the door again, without results, to see if the child had become visible. She observed to her guest that she couldn't call it anything but contrary that he should not turn up, when he knew so well, most days in the week, when his tea was ready. To which Mrs. Bowerbank rejoined, fixing her companion again with the steady orb of justice, "And do he have his tea, that way, by himself, like a little gentleman?"

"Well, I try to give it to him tidy-like, at a suitable hour," said Miss Pynsent, guiltily. "And there might be some who would say that, for the matter of that, he is a little gentleman," she added, with an effort at mitigation which, as she immediately became conscious, only involved her more deeply.

"There are people silly enough to say anything. If it's your parents that settle your station, the child hasn't much to be thankful for," Mrs. Bowerbank went on, in the manner of a woman accustomed to looking facts in the face.

Miss Pynsent was very timid, but she adored the aristocracy, and there were elements in the boy's life which she was not prepared to sacrifice even to a person who represented such a possibility of grating bolts and clanking chains. "I suppose we oughtn't to forget that his father was very high," she suggested, appealingly, with her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

"His father? Who knows who he was? He doesn't set up for having a father, does he?"

"But, surely, wasn't it proved that Lord Frederick" —

"My dear woman, nothing was proved except that she stabbed his lordship in the back with a very long knife, that he died of the blow, and that she got the full sentence. What does such a piece as that know about fathers? The less said about the poor child's papa, the better!"

This view of the case caused Miss Pynsent fairly to gasp, for it pushed over, with a touch, a certain tall imaginative structure which she had been piling up for years. Even as she heard it crash around her she couldn't forbear the attempt to save at least some of the material. "Really — really," she panted, "she never had to do with any one but the nobility!"

Mrs. Bowerbank surveyed her hostess with an expressionless eye. "My dear young lady, what does a respectable little body like you, that sits all day with her needle and scissors, know about the doings of a wicked, low foreigner that carries a knife? I was there when she came in, and I know to what she had sunk. Her conversation was choice, I assure you."

"Oh, it's very dreadful, and of course I know nothing in particular," Miss Pynsent quavered. "But she wasn't low when I worked at the same place with her, and she often told me she would do nothing for any one that wasn't at the very top."

"She might have talked to you of something that would have done you both more good," Mrs. Bowerbank remarked, while the dressmaker felt rebuked in the past as well as in the present. "At the very top, poor thing! Well, she's at the very bottom now. If she wasn't low when she worked, it's a pity she didn't stick to her work; and as for pride of birth, that's an article I recommend your young friend to leave to others. You had better believe what I say, because I'm a woman of the world."

Indeed she was, as Miss Pynsent felt, to whom all this was very terrible, letting in the cold light of the penal system on a dear, dim little theory. She had cared for the child because maternity was in her nature, and this was the only manner in which fortune had put it in her path to become a mother. She had as few belongings as the baby, and it had seemed to her that he would add to her importance in the little world of Lomax Place (if

she kept it a secret how she came by him), quite in the proportion in which she should contribute to his maintenance. Her weakness and loneliness went out to his, and in the course of time this united desolation was peopled by the dressmaker's romantic mind with a hundred consoling evocations. The boy proved neither a dunce nor a reprobate; but what endeared him to her most was her conviction that he belonged, "by the left hand," as she had read in a novel, to an ancient and exalted race, the list of whose representatives and the record of whose alliances she had once (when she took home some work and was made to wait, alone, in a lady's boudoir) had the opportunity of reading in a fat red book, eagerly and tremblingly consulted. She bent her head before Mrs. Bowerbank's overwhelming logic, but she felt in her heart that she shouldn't give the child up, for all that, that she believed in him still, and that she recognized, as distinctly as she revered, the quality of her betters. To believe in Hyacinth, for Miss Pynsent, was to believe that he was the son of the extremely immoral Lord Frederick. She had told him so, from the earliest age, and as Mrs. Bowerbank would be sure not to approve of such indiscretions, Miss Pynsent prayed she might not question her on that part of the business. It was not that, when it was necessary, the little dressmaker had any scruple about using the arts of prevarication; she was a kind and innocent creature, but she told fibs as freely as she invented trimmings. She had, however, not yet been questioned by an emissary of the law, and her heart beat faster when Mrs. Bowerbank said to her, in deep tones, with an effect of abruptness, "And pray, Miss Pynsent, does the child know it?"

"Know about Lord Frederick?" Miss Pynsent palpitated.

"Bother Lord Frederick! Know about his mother."

"Oh, I can't say that. I have never told him."

"But has any one else told him?"

To this inquiry Miss Pynsent's answer was more prompt and more proud; it was with an agreeable sense of having conducted herself with extraordinary wisdom and propriety that she replied, "How could any one know? I have never breathed it to a creature!"

Mrs. Bowerbank gave utterance to no commendation; she only put down her empty glass and wiped her large mouth with much thoroughness and deliberation. Then she said, as if it were as cheerful an idea as, in the premises, she was capable of expressing, "Ah, well, there'll be plenty, later on, to give him all information!"

"I pray God he may live and die without knowing it!" Miss Pynsent cried, with eagerness.

Her companion gazed at her with a kind of professional patience. "You don't keep your ideas together. How can he go to her, then, if he's never to know?"

"Oh, did you mean she would tell him?" Miss Pynsent responded, plaintively.

"Tell him! He won't need to be told, once she gets hold of him and gives him — what she told me."

"What she told you?" Miss Pynsent repeated, open-eyed.

"The kiss her lips have been famished for for years."

"Ah, poor desolate woman!" the little dressmaker murmured, with her pity gushing up again. "Of course he'll see she's fond of him," she pursued, simply. Then she added, with an inspiration more brilliant, "We might tell him she's his aunt!"

"You may tell him she's his grandmother, if you like. But it's all in the family."

"Yes, on that side," said Miss Pynsent, musingly and irrepressibly. "And will she speak French?" she inquired. "In that case he won't understand."

"Oh, a child will understand its own mother, whatever she speaks," Mrs. Bowerbank returned, declining to administer a superficial comfort. But she subjoined, opening the door for escape from a prospect which bristled with dangers, "Of course, it's just according to your own conscience. You needn't bring the child at all, unless you like. There's many a one that wouldn't. There's no compulsion."

"And would nothing be done to me, if I didn't?" poor Miss Pynsent asked, unable to rid herself of the impression that it was somehow the arm of the law that was stretched out to touch her.

"The only thing that could happen to you would be that he might throw it up against you later," the lady from the prison observed, with a gloomy impartiality.

"Yes, indeed, if he were to know that I had kept him back."

"Oh, he 'd be sure to know, one of these days. We see a great deal of that — the way things come out," said Mrs. Bowerbank, whose view of life seemed to abound in cheerless contingencies. "You must remember that it is her dying wish, and that you may have it on your conscience."

"That's a thing I never could abide!" the little dressmaker exclaimed, with great emphasis and a visible shiver; after which she picked up various scattered remnants of muslin and cut paper, and began to roll them together with a desperate and mechanical haste. "It's quite awful, to know what to do — if you are very sure she is dying."

"Do you mean she's shamming? we have plenty of that — but we know how to treat 'em."

"Lord, I suppose so," murmured Miss Pynsent; while her visitor went on to say that the unfortunate person on whose behalf she had undertaken this solemn pilgrimage might live a week and might live a fortnight, but if she lived a month, would violate (as Mrs. Bowerbank might express herself) every established law of nature, being reduced to skin and bone, with nothing left of her but the main desire to see her child.

"If you 're afraid of her talking, it isn't much she 'd be able to say. And we shouldn't allow you more than

about eight minutes," Mrs. Bowerbank pursued, in a tone that seemed to refer itself to an iron discipline.

"I'm sure I shouldn't want more; that would be enough to last me many a year," said Miss Pynsent, plaintively. And then she added, with another illumination, "Don't you think he might throw it up against me that I did take him? People might tell him about her in later years; but if he hadn't seen her, he wouldn't be obliged to believe them."

Mrs. Bowerbank considered this a moment, as if it were rather a supersubtle argument, and then answered, quite in the spirit of her official pessimism, "There is one thing you may be sure of: whatever you decide to do, as soon as ever he grows up he will make you wish you had done the opposite." Mrs. Bowerbank called it opposite.

"Oh, dear, then, I'm glad it will be a long time."

"It will be ever so long, if once he gets it into his head! At any rate, you must do as you think best. Only, if you come, you mustn't come when it's all over."

"It's too impossible to decide."

"It is, indeed," said Mrs. Bowerbank, with superior consistency. And she seemed more placidly grim than ever when she remarked, gathering up her loosened shawl, that she was much obliged to Miss Pynsent for her civility, and had been quite freshened up: her visit had so completely deprived her hostess of that sort of calm. Miss Pynsent gave the fullest expression to her perplexity in the supreme exclamation:

"If you could only wait and see the child, I'm sure it would help you to judge!"

"My dear woman, I don't want to judge — it's none of our business!" Mrs. Bowerbank exclaimed; and she had no sooner uttered the words than the door of the room creaked open, and a small boy stood there, gazing at her. Her eyes rested on him a moment, and then, most unexpectedly, she gave an inconsequent cry. "Is that the child? Oh, Lord o' mercy, don't take him!"

"Now ain't he shrinking and sensitive?" demanded Miss Pynsent, who had pounced upon him, and, holding him an instant at arm's length, appealed eagerly to her visitor. "Ain't he delicate and highbred, and wouldn't he be thrown into a state?" Delicate as he might be. the little dressmaker shook him smartly for his naughtiness in being out of the way when he was wanted, and brought him to the big, square-faced, deep-voiced lady, who took up, as it were, all that side of the room. But Mrs. Bowerbank laid no hand upon him; she only dropped her gaze from a tremendous height, and her forbearance seemed a tribute to that fragility of constitution on which Miss Pynsent desired to insist; just as her continued gravity was an implication that this scrupulous woman might well not know what to do.

"Speak to the lady, nicely, and tell her you are very sorry to have kept her waiting."

The child hesitated a moment, while he reciprocated Mrs. Bowerbank's inspection, and then he said, with a strange, cool, conscious indifference (Miss Pynsent instantly recognized it as his aristocratic manner), "I don't think she can have been in a very great hurry."

There was irony in the words, for it is a remarkable fact that, even at the age of ten, Hyacinth Robinson was ironical; but the subject of his allusion, who was not nimble, withal, appeared not to interpret it; and she rejoined only by remarking, over his head, to Miss Pynsent, "It's the very face of her over again!"

"Of her? But what do you say to Lord Frederick?"

"I have seen lords that wasn't so dainty!"

Miss Pynsent had seen very few lords, but she entered, with a passionate thrill, into this generalization; controlling herself, however, for she remembered the child was tremendously sharp, sufficiently to declare, in an edifying tone, that he would look more like what he ought to, if his face were a little cleaner.

"It was probably Millicent Henning dirtied my face, when she kissed me," the boy announced, with slow gravity, looking all the while at Mrs. Bowerbank. He exhibited not a symptom of shyness.

"Millicent Henning is a very bad little girl; she'll come to no good," said Miss Pynsent, with familiar decision, and also, considering that the young lady in question had been her effective messenger, with marked ingratitude.

Against this qualification the child instantly protested. "Why is she bad? I don't think she is bad; I like her very much." It came over him that he had too hastily shifted to her shoulders the responsibility of his unseemly appearance, and he wished to make up to her for that betrayal. He dimly felt that nothing but that particular accusation could have pushed him to it, for he hated people who were not fresh, who had smutches and streaks. Millicent Henning generally had two or three, which she borrowed from her doll, into whom she was always rubbing her nose, and whose dinginess was contagious. It was quite inevitable she should have left her mark under his own nose, when she claimed her reward for coming to tell him about the lady who wanted him.

Miss Pynsent held the boy against her knee, trying to present him so that Mrs. Bowerbank should agree with her about his having the air of race. He was exceedingly diminutive, even for his years, and though his appearance was not positively sickly, it seemed written in his attenuated little person that he would never be either tall or strong. His dark blue eyes were separated by a wide interval, which increased the fairness and sweetness of his face, and his abundant, curly hair, which grew thick and long, had the golden brownness predestined to elicit exclamations of delight from ladies when they take the inventory of a child. His features were smooth and pretty; his head was set upon a slim little neck; his expression, grave and clear, showed a quick perception as well as a great credulity; and he was altogether, in his innocent smallness, a refined and

interesting figure.

"Yes, he's one that would be sure to remember," said Mrs. Bowerbank, mentally contrasting him with the undeveloped members of her own brood, who had never been retentive of anything but the halfpence which they occasionally contrived to filch from her. Her eyes descended to the details of his toilet: the careful mending of his short breeches and his long, colored stockings, which she was in a position to appreciate, as well as the knot of bright ribbon which the dressmaker had passed into his collar, slightly crumpled by Miss Henning's embrace. Of course Miss Pynsent had only one to look after, but her visitor was obliged to recognize that she had the highest standard in respect to buttons. "And you do turn him out so it's a pleasure," she went on, noting the ingenious patches in the child's shoes, which, to her mind, were repaired for all the world like those of a little nobleman.

"I'm sure you 're very civil," said Miss Pynsent, in a state of severe exaltation. "There's never a needle but mine has come near him. That's exactly what I think: the impression would go so deep."

"Do you want to see me only to look at me?" Hyacinth inquired, with a candor which, though unstudied, had again much of the force of satire.

"I'm sure it's very kind of the lady to notice you at all!" cried his protectress, giving him an ineffectual jerk. "You 're no bigger than a flea; there are many that wouldn't spy you out."

"You'll find he's big enough, I expect, when he begins to go," Mrs. Bowerbank remarked, tranquilly; and she added that now she saw how he was turned out she couldn't but feel that the other side was to be considered. In her effort to be discreet, on account of his being present (and so precociously attentive), she became slightly enigmatical; but Miss Pynsent gathered her meaning, which was that it was very true the child would take everything in and keep it: but at the same time it was precisely his being so attractive that made it a kind of sin not to gratify the poor woman, who, if she knew what he looked like to-day, wouldn't forgive his adoptive mamma for not producing him. "Certainly, in her place, I should go off easier if I had seen them curls," Mrs. Bowerbank declared, with a flight of maternal imagination which brought her to her feet, while Miss Pynsent felt that she was leaving her dreadfully ploughed up, and without any really fertilizing seed having been sown. The little dressmaker packed the child upstairs to tidy himself for his tea, and while she accompanied her visitor to the door, told her that if she would have a little more patience with her, she would think, a day or two longer, what was best, and write to her when she should have decided. Mrs. Bowerbank continued to move in a realm superior to poor Miss Pynsent's scruples and timidities, and her impartiality gave her hostess a high idea of her respectability; but the way was a little smoothed when, after Amanda had moaned once more, on the threshold, helplessly and irrelevantly, "Ain't it a pity she's so bad?" the ponderous lady from the prison rejoined, in those tones which seemed meant to resound through corridors of stone, "I assure you, there's a many that's much worse!"

Chapter II

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MISS PYNSENT, when she found herself alone, felt that she was really quite upside down; for the event that had just occurred had never entered into her calculations: the very nature of the case had seemed to preclude it. All she knew and all she wished to know was that in one of the dreadful institutions constructed for such purposes her quondam comrade was serving out the sentence that had been substituted for the other (the unspeakable horror) almost when the halter was already round her neck. As there was no question of that concession being stretched any further, poor Florentine seemed only a little more dead than other people, having no decent tombstone to mark the place where she lay. Miss Pynsent had therefore never thought again of her dying; she had no idea to what prison she had been committed on being removed from Newgate (she wished to keep her mind a blank about the matter, in the interest of the child), and it could not occur to her that out of such silence and darkness a voice would reach her again, especially a voice that she should really have to listen to. Miss Pynsent would have said, before Mrs. Bowerbank's visit, that she had no account to render to any one; that she had taken up the child (who might have starved in the gutter) out of charity, and had brought him up, poor and precarious as her own subsistence had been, without a penny's help from another source; that the mother had forfeited every right and title; and that this had been understood between them if anything, in so dreadful an hour, could have been said to be understood when she went to see her at Newgate (that terrible episode, nine years before, overshadowed all Miss Pynsent's other memories), — went to see her because Florentine had sent for her (a name, face, and address coming up out of the still recent but sharply separated past of their working-girl years), as the one friend to whom she could appeal with some chance of a pitying answer. The effect of violent emotion, with Miss Pynsent, was not to make her sit with idle hands, or fidget about to no purpose; under its influence, on the contrary, she threw herself into little jobs, as a fugitive takes to bypaths, and clipped and cut, and stitched and basted, as if she were running a race with hysterics. And while her hands, her scissors, her needle flew, an infinite succession of fantastic possibilities trotted through her confused little head; she had a furious imagination, and the act of reflection, in her mind, was always a panorama of figures and scenes. She had had her picture of the future, painted in rather rosy

hues, hung up before her now for a good many years; but it seemed to her that Mrs. Bowerbank's heavy hand had suddenly punched a hole in the canvas. It must be added, however, that if Amanda's thoughts were apt to be bewildering visions, they sometimes led her to make up her mind, and on this particular September evening she arrived at a momentous decision. What she made up her mind to was to take advice, and in pursuance of this view she rushed downstairs and, jerking Hyacinth away from his simple but unfinished repast, packed him across the street to tell Mr. Vetch (if he had not yet started for the theatre) that she begged he would come in to see her when he came home that night, as she had something very particular she wished to say to him. It didn't matter if he should be very late, he could come in at any hour — he would see her light in the window — and he would do her a real mercy. Miss Pynsent knew it would be of no use for her to go to bed; she felt as if she should never close her eyes again. Mr. Vetch was her most distinguished friend; she had an immense appreciation of his cleverness and knowledge of the world, as well as of the purity of his taste in matters of conduct and opinion; and she had already consulted him about Hyacinth's education. The boy needed no urging to go on such an errand, for he, too, had his ideas about the little fiddler, the second violin in the orchestra of the Vauxhall Theatre. Mr. Vetch had once obtained for the pair an order for two seats at a pantomime, and for Hyacinth the impression of that ecstatic evening had consecrated him, placed him forever in the golden glow of the footlights. There were things in life of which, even at the age of ten, it was a conviction of the boy's that it would be his fate never to see enough, and one of them was the wonder-world illuminated by those playhouse lamps. But there would be chances, perhaps, if one didn't lose sight of Mr. Vetch; he might open the door again; he was a privileged, magical mortal, who went to the play every night.

He came in to see Miss Pynsent about midnight; as soon as she heard the lame tinkle of the bell she went to the door to let him in. He was an original, in the fullest sense of the word: a lonely, disappointed, embittered, cynical little man, whose musical organization had been sterile, who had the nerves, the sensibilities, of a gentleman, and whose fate had condemned him, for the last ten years, to play a fiddle at a second-rate theatre for a few shillings a week. He had ideas of his own about everything, and they were not always very comforting. For Amanda Pynsent he represented art, literature (the literature of the playbill), and philosophy, and she always felt about him as if he belonged to a higher social sphere (though his earnings were hardly greater than her own, and he lived, in a single back-room, in a house where she had never seen a window washed). He had, for her, the glamour of reduced gentility and fallen fortunes; she was conscious that he spoke a different language (though she couldn't have said in what the difference consisted) from the other members of her humble, almost suburban circle; and the shape of his hands was distinctly aristocratic. (Miss Pynsent, as I have intimated, was immensely preoccupied with that element in life.) Mr. Vetch displeased her only by one of the facets of his character, — his blasphemous republican, radical views, and the contemptuous manner in which he expressed himself about the nobility. On that ground he distressed her extremely, though he never seemed to her so clever as when he horrified her most. These dreadful theories (expressed so brilliantly that, really, they might have been dangerous, if Miss Pynsent had not known her own place so well) constituted no presumption against his refined origin; they were explained, rather, to a certain extent, by a just resentment at finding himself excluded from his proper place. Mr. Vetch was short, fat, and bald, though he was not much older than Miss Pynsent, who was not much older than some people who called themselves forty-five; he always went to the theatre in evening-dress, with a flower in his buttonhole, and wore a glass in one eye. He looked mild and smooth, and as if he would fidget at the most about the "get up" of his linen; you would have thought him finical but superficial, and never have suspected that he was a revolutionist, or even a critic of life. Sometimes, when he could get away from the theatre early enough, he went with a pianist, a friend of his, to play dance-music at small parties; and after such expeditions he was particularly cynical and startling; he indulged in diatribes against the British middle-class, its Philistinism, its snobbery. He seldom had much conversation with Miss Pynsent without telling her that she had the intellectual outlook of a caterpillar; but this was his privilege after a friendship now of seven years' standing, which had begun (the year after he came to live in Lomax Place) with her going over to nurse him, on learning from the milkwoman that he was alone at Number 17, — laid up with an attack of gastritis. He always compared her to an insect or a bird, and she didn't mind, because she knew he liked her, and she herself liked all winged creatures. How indeed could she complain, after hearing him call the Queen a superannuated form, and the Archbishop of Canterbury a grotesque superstition?

He laid his violin-case on the table, which was covered with a confusion of fashion-plates and pincushions, and glanced toward the fire, where a kettle was gently hissing. Miss Pynsent, who had put it on half an hour before, read his glance, and reflected with complacency that Mrs. Bowerbank had not absolutely drained the little bottle in the chiffonier. She put it on the table again, this time with a single glass, and told her visitor that, as a great exception, he might light his pipe. In fact, she always made the exception, and he always replied to the gracious speech by inquiring whether she supposed the greengrocers' wives, the butchers' daughters, for whom she worked, had fine enough noses to smell, in the garments she sent home, the fumes of his tobacco. He knew her "connection" was confined to small shopkeepers, but she didn't wish others to know it, and would have liked them to believe it was important that the poor little stuffs she made up (into very queer fashions, I am afraid) should not surprise the feminine nostril. But it had always been impossible to impose on Mr. Vetch; he guessed the truth, the untrimmed truth, about everything, in a moment. She was sure he would do so now, in regard to this solemn question which had come up about Hyacinth; he would see that

though she was agreeably flurried at finding herself whirled in the last eddies of a case that had been so celebrated in its day, her secret wish was to shirk her duty (if it was a duty); to keep the child from ever knowing his mother's unmentionable history, the shame that attached to his origin, the opportunity she had had of letting him see the wretched woman before she died. She knew Mr. Vetch would read her troubled thoughts, but she hoped he would say they were natural and just: she reflected that as he took an interest in Hyacinth he wouldn't want him to be subjected to a mortification that might rankle forever and perhaps even crush him to the earth. She related Mrs. Bowerbank's visit, while he sat upon the sofa, in the very place where that majestic woman had reposed, and puffed his smoke-wreaths into the dusky little room. He knew the story of the child's birth, had known it years before, so she had no startling revelation to make. He was not in the least agitated at learning that Florentine was dying in prison, and had managed to get a message conveyed to Amanda; he thought this so much in the usual course that he said to Miss Pynsent, "Did you expect her to live on there forever, working out her terrible sentence, just to spare you the annoyance of a dilemma, or any reminder of her miserable existence, which yon have preferred to forget?" That was just the sort of question Mr. Vetch was sure to ask, and he inquired, further, of his dismayed hostess, whether she was sure her friend's message (he called the unhappy creature her friend) had come to her in the regular way. The warders, surely, had no authority to introduce visitors to their captives; and was it a question of her going off to the prison on the sole authority of Mrs. Bowerbank? The little dressmaker explained that this lady had merely come to sound her, Florentine had begged so hard. She had been in Mrs. Bowerbank's ward before her removal to the infirmary, where she now lay, ebbing away, and she had communicated her desire to the Catholic chaplain, who had undertaken that some satisfaction — of inquiry, at least — should be given her. He had thought it best to ascertain first whether the person in charge of the child would be willing to bring him, such a course being perfectly optional, and he had some talk with Mrs. Bowerbank on the subject, in which it was agreed between them that if she would approach Miss Pynsent and explain to her the situation, leaving her to do what she thought best, he would answer for it that the consent of the governor of the prison should be given to the interview. Miss Pynsent had lived for fourteen years in Lomax Place, and Florentine had never forgotten that this was her address at the time she came to her at Newgate (before her dreadful sentence had been commuted), and promised, in an ontgush of pity for one whom she had known in the days of her honesty and brightness, that she would save the child, keep it from the workhouse and the streets, keep it from the fate that had clutched the mother. Mrs. Bowerbank had a half-holiday, and a sister living also in the north of London, to whom she had been for some time intending a visit; so that after her domestic duty had been performed, it had been possible for her to drop in on Miss Pynsent in a kind of natural, casual way, and put the case before her. It would be just as she might be disposed to view it. She was to think it over a day or two, but not long, because the woman was so ill, and then write to Mrs. Bowerbank, at the prison. If she should consent, Mrs. Bowerbank would tell the chaplain, and the chaplain would obtain the order from the governor and send it to Lomax Place; after which Amanda would immediately set out with her unconscious victim. But should she — must she — consent? That was the terrible, the heart-shaking question, with which Miss Pynsent's unaided wisdom had been unable to grapple.

"After all, he isn't hers any more, — he's mine, mine only and mine always. I should like to know if all I have done for him doesn't make him so!" It was in this manner that Amanda Pynsent delivered herself, while she plied her needle, faster than ever, in a piece of stuff that was pinned to her knee.

Mr. Vetch watched her awhile, blowing silently at his pipe, with his head thrown back on the high, stiff, old-fashioned sofa, and his little legs crossed under him like a Turk's. "It's true you have done a good deal for him. You are a good little woman, my dear Pinnie, after all." He said "after all," because that was a part of his tone. In reality he had never had a moment's doubt that she was the best little woman in the north of London.

"I have done what I could, and I don't want no fuss made about it. Only it does make a difference when you come to look at it — about taking him off to see another woman. And such another woman — and in such a place! I think it's hardly right to take an innocent child."

"I don't know about that; there are people that would tell you it would do him good. If he didn't like the place as a child, he would take more care to keep out of it later."

"Lord, Mr. Vetch, how can you think? And him such a perfect little gentleman!" Miss Pynsent cried.

"Is it you that have made him one?" the fiddler asked. "It doesn't run in the family, you 'd say."

"Family? what do you know about that?" she replied, quickly, catching at her dearest, her only hobby.

"Yes, indeed, what does any one know? what did she know herself?" And then Miss Pynsent's visitor added, irrelevantly, "Why should you have taken him on your back? Why did you want to be so good? No one else thinks it necessary."

"I didn't want to be good. That is, I do want to, of course, in a general way: but that wasn't the reason then. But I had nothing of my own, — I had nothing in the world but my thimble."

"That would have seemed to most people a reason for not adopting a prostitute's bastard."

"Well, I went to see him at the place where he was (just where she had left him, with the woman of the house), and I saw what kind of a shop that was, and felt it was a shame an innocent child should grow up in such a place." Miss Pynsent defended herself as earnestly as if her inconsistency had been of a criminal cast. "And he wouldn't have grown up, neither. They wouldn't have troubled themselves long with a helpless baby. They 'd have played some trick on him, if it was only to send him to the workhouse. Besides, I always was fond

of small creatures, and I have been fond of this one," she went on, speaking as if with a consciousness, on her own part, of almost heroic proportions.

"He was in my way the first two or three years, and it was a good deal of a pull to look after the business and him together. But now he's like the business — he seems to go of himself."

"Oh, if he flourishes as the business flourishes, you can just enjoy your peace of mind," said the fiddler, still with his manner of making a small dry joke of everything.

"That's all very well, but it doesn't close my eyes to that poor woman lying there and moaning just for the touch of his little and before she passes away. Mrs. Bowerbank says she believes I will bring him."

"Who believes? Mrs. Bowerbank?"

"I wonder if there's anything in life fearful enough for you to take it seriously," Miss Pynsent rejoined, snapping off a thread, with temper. "The day you stop laughing I should like to be there."

"So long as you are there, I shall never stop. What is it you want me to advise you? to take the child, or to leave the mother to groan herself out?"

"I want you to tell me whether he'll curse me when he grows older."

"That depends upon what you do. However, he will probably do it in either case."

"You don't believe that, because you like him," said Amanda, with acuteness.

"Precisely; and he'll curse me too. He'll curse every one. He won't be happy."

"I don't know how you think I bring him up," the little dressmaker remarked, with dignity.

"You don't bring him up; he brings you up."

"That's what you have always said; but you don't know. If you mean that he does as he likes, then he ought to be happy. It ain't kind of you to say he won't be," Miss Pynsent added, reproachfully.

"I would say anything you like, if what I say would help the matter. He's a thin-skinned, morbid, mooning little beggar, with a good deal of imagination and not much perseverance, who will expect a good deal more of life than he will find in it. That's why he won't be happy."

Miss Pynsent listened to this description of her protege with an appearance of criticising it mentally; but in reality she didn't know what "morbid" meant, and didn't like to ask. "He's the cleverest person I know, except yourself," she said in a moment, for Mr. Vetch's words had been in the key of what she thought most remarkable in him. What that was she would have been unable to say.

"Thank you very much for putting me first," the fiddler rejoined, after a series of puffs. "The youngster's interesting, one sees that he has a mind, and in that respect he is — I won't say unique, but peculiar. I shall watch him with curiosity, to see what he grows into. But I shall always be glad that I'm a selfish brute of a bachelor; that I never invested in that class of goods."

"Well, you are comforting. You would spoil him more than I do," said Amanda.

"Possibly, but it would be in a different way. I wouldn't tell him every three minutes that his father was a duke."

"A duke I never mentioned!" the little dressmaker cried, with eagerness. "I never specified any rank, nor said a word about any one in particular. I never so much as insinuated the name of his lordship. But I may have said that if the truth was to be found out, he might be proved to be connected — in the way of cousinship, or something of the kind, — with the highest in the land. I should have thought myself wanting if I hadn't given him a glimpse of that. But there is one thing I have always added — that the truth never is found out."

"You are still more comforting than I!" Mr. Vetch exclaimed. He continued to watch her, with his charitable, round-faced smile, and then he said, "You won't do what I say; so what is the use of my telling you?"

"I assure you I will, if you say you believe it's the only right,"

"Do I often say anything so asinine? Right — right? what have you to do with that? If you want the only right, you are very particular."

"Please, then, what am I to go by?" the dressmaker asked, bewildered.

"You are to go by this, by what will take the youngster down."

"Take him down, my poor little pet?"

"Your poor little pet thinks himself the flower of creation. I don't say there is any harm in that: a fine, blooming, odoriferous conceit is a natural appendage of youth and cleverness. I don't say there is any great harm in it, but if you want a guide as to how you are to treat a boy, that's as good a guide as any other."

"You want me to arrange the interview, then?"

"I don't want you to do anything, but give me another sip of brandy. I just say this: that I think it's a great gain, early in life, to know the worst; then we don't live in a fool's paradise. I did that till I was nearly forty; then I woke up and found I was in Lomax Place." Whenever Mr. Vetch said anything that could be construed as a reference to a former position which had had elements of distinction, Miss Pynsent observed a discreet, a respectful silence, and that is why she did not challenge him now, though she wanted very much to say that Hyacinth was no more "presumptuous" (that was the term she should have used) than he had reason to be, with his genteel figure and his wonderful intelligence; and that as for thinking himself a "flower" of any kind, he knew but too well that he lived in a small black-faced house, miles away from the West End, rented by a poor little woman who took lodgers, and who, as they were of such a class that they were not always to be

depended upon to settle her weekly account, had a strain to make two ends meet, in spite of the sign between her windows —

MISS AMANDA PYNSENT. MODES ET ROBES. dressmaking in all its branches. court-dresses, mantles. and fashionable bonnets.

Singularly enough, her companion, before she had permitted herself to interpose, took up her own thought (in one of its parts), and remarked that perhaps she would say of the child that he was, so far as his actual circumstances were concerned, low enough down in the world, without one's wanting him to be any lower. "But by the time he's twenty, he'll persuade himself that Lomax Place was a bad dream, that your lodgers and your dressmaking were as imaginary as they are vulgar, and that when an old friend came to see you late at night, it was not your amiable practice to make him a glass of brandy and water. He'll teach himself to forget all this: he'll have a way."

"Do you mean he'll forget me, he'll deny me?" cried Miss Pynsent, stopping the movement of her needle, short off, for the first time.

"As the person designated in that attractive blazonry on the outside of your house, decidedly he will; and me, equally, as a bald-headed, pot-bellied fiddler, who regarded you as the most graceful and refined of his acquaintance. I don't mean he'll disown you and pretend he never knew you: I don't think he will ever be such an odious little cad as that; he probably won't be a sneak, and he strikes me as having some love, and possibly even some gratitude, in him. But he will, in his imagination (and that will always persuade him), subject you to some extraordinary metamorphosis; he will dress you up."

"He'll dress me up!" Amanda ejaculated, quite ceasing to follow the train of Mr. Vetch's demonstration. "Do you mean that he'll have the property — that his relations will take him up?"

"My dear, delightful, idiotic Pinnie, I am speaking in a figurative manner. I don't pretend to say what his precise position will be when we are relegated; but I affirm that relegation will be our fate. Therefore don't stuff him with any more illusions than are necessary to keep him alive; he will be sure to pick up enough on the way. On the contrary, give him a good stiff dose of the truth at the start."

"Dear me, dear me, of course you see much further into it than I could ever do," Pinnie murmured, as she threaded a needle.

Mr. Vetch paused a minute, but apparently not out of deference to this amiable interruption. He went on suddenly, with a ring of feeling in his voice. "Let him know, because it will be useful to him later, the state of the account between society and himself; he can then conduct himself accordingly. If he is the illegitimate child of a French good-for-naught who murdered one of her numerous lovers, don't shuffle out of sight so important a fact. I regard that as a most valuable origin."

"Lord, Mr. Vetch, how you talk!" cried Miss Pynsent, staring. "I don't know what one would think, to hear you."

"Surely, my dear lady, and for this reason: that those are the people with whom society has to count. It hasn't with you and me." Miss Pynsent gave a sigh which might have meant either that she was well aware of that, or that Mr. Vetch had a terrible way of enlarging a subject, especially when it was already too big for her; and her philosophic visitor went on: "Poor little devil, let him see her, let him see her."

"And if later, when he's twenty, he says to me that if I hadn't meddled in it he need never have known, he need never have had that shame, pray what am I to say to him then? That's what I can't get out my head."

"You can say to him that a young man who is sorry for having gone to his mother when, in her last hours, she lay groaning for him on a pallet in a penitentiary, deserves more than the sharpest pang he can possibly feel." And the little fiddler, getting up, went over to the fireplace and shook out the ashes of his pipe.

"Well, I am sure it's natural he should feel badly," said Miss Pynsent, folding up her work with the same desperate quickness that had animated her throughout the evening.

"I haven't the least objection to his feeling badly: that's not the worst thing in the world! If a few more people felt badly in this sodden, stolid, stupid race of ours, the world would wake up to an idea or two, and we should see the beginning of the dance. It's the dull acceptance, the absence of reflection, the impenetrable density." Here Mr. Vetch stopped short; his hostess stood before him with eyes of entreaty, with clasped hands.

"Now, Theophilus Vetch, don't go off into them dreadful wild theories," she cried, always ungrammatical when she was strongly moved. "You always fly away over the housetops. I thought you liked him better — the dear little unfortunate."

Theophilus Vetch had pocketed his pipe; he put on his hat with the freedom of old acquaintance and of Lomax Place, and took up his small, coffinlike fiddle-case. "My good Pinnie, I don't think you understand a word I say. It's no use talking — do as you like!"

"Well, I must say I don't think it was worth your coming in at midnight only to tell me that. I don't like anything — I hate the whole dreadful business!"

He bent over, in his short plumpness, to kiss her hand, as he had seen people do on the stage. "My dear friend, we have different ideas, and I never shall succeed in driving mine into your head. It's because I am fond of him, poor little devil; but you will never understand that. I want him to know everything, and especially the worst — the worst, as I have said. If I were in his position, I shouldn't thank you for trying to make a fool of me!"

"A fool of you? as if I thought of anything but his 'appiness!" Amanda Pynsent exclaimed. She stood looking at him, but following her own reflections; she had given up the attempt to enter into his whims. She remembered, what she had noticed before, in other occurrences, that his reasons were always more extraordinary than his behavior itself; if you only considered his life, you wouldn't have thought him so fanciful. "Very likely I think too much of that," she added. "She wants him and cries for him: that's what keeps coming back to me." She took up her lamp to light Mr. Vetch to the door (for the dim luminary in the passage had long since been extinguished), and before he left the house he turned, suddenly, stopping short, and said, his placid face taking a strange expression from the quizzical glimmer of his little round eyes: —

"What does it matter after all, and why do you worry?" What difference can it make what happens — on either side — to such low people?"

Chapter III

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MRS. BOWERBANK had let her know she would meet her, almost at the threshold of the dreadful place; and this thought had sustained Miss Pynsent in her long and devious journey, performed partly on foot, partly in a succession of omnibuses. She had had ideas about a cab, but she decided to reserve the cab for the return, as then, very likely, she should be so shaken with emotion, so overpoweringly affected, that it would be a comfort to escape from observation. She had no confidence that if once she passed the door of the prison she should ever be restored to liberty and her customers; it seemed to her an adventure as dangerous as it was dismal, and she was immensely touched by the clear-faced eagerness of the child at her side, who strained forward as brightly as he had done on another occasion, still celebrated in Miss Pynsent's industrious annals, a certain sultry Saturday in August, when she had taken him to the Tower of London. It had been a terrible question with her. when once she made up her mind, what she should tell him about the nature of their errand. She determined to tell him as little as possible, to say only that she was going to see a poor woman who was in prison on account of a crime she had committed years before, and who had sent for her, and had caused her to be told at the same time that if there was any child she could see — as children (if they were good) were bright and cheering — it would make her very happy that such a little visitor should come as well. It was very difficult, with Hyacinth, to make reservations or mysteries; he wanted to know everything about everything, and he projected the light of a hundred questions upon Miss Pynsent's incarcerated friend. She had to admit that she had been her friend (for where else was the obligation to go to see her?); but she spoke of the acquaintance as if it were of the slightest (it had survived in the memory of the prisoner only because every one else — the world was so very hard! — had turned away from her), and she congratulated herself on a happy inspiration when she represented the crime for which such a penalty had been exacted as the theft of a gold watch, in a moment of irresistible temptation. The woman had had a wicked husband, who maltreated and deserted her, and she was very poor, almost starving, dreadfully pressed. Hyacinth listened to her history with absorbed attention, and then he said: —

"And hadn't she any children — hadn't she a little boy?"

This inquiry seemed to Miss Pynsent a portent of future embarrassments, but she met it as bravely as she could, and replied that she believed the wretched victim of the law had had (once upon a time) a very small baby, but she was afraid she had completely lost sight of it. He must know they didn't allow babies in prisons. To this Hyacinth rejoined that of course they would allow him, because he was — really — big. Miss Pynsent fortified herself with the memory of her other pilgrimage to Newgate, upwards of ten years before; she had escaped from that ordeal, and had even had the comfort of knowing that in its fruits the interview had been beneficent. The responsibility, however, was much greater now, and, after all, it was not on her own account she was in a nervous tremor, but on that of the urchin over whom the shadow of the house of shame might cast itself.

They made the last part of their approach on foot, having got themselves deposited as near as possible to the river, and keeping beside it (according to advice elicited by Miss Pynsent, on the way, in a dozen confidential interviews with policemen, conductors of omnibuses, and small shopkeepers), till they came to a big, dark building with towers, which they would know as soon as they looked at it. They knew it, in fact, soon enough, when they saw it lift its dusky mass from the bank of the Thames, lying there and sprawling over the whole neighborhood, with brown, bare, windowless walls, ugly, truncated pinnacles, and a character unspeakably sad and stern. It looked very sinister and wicked, to Miss Pynsent's eyes, and she wondered why a prison should have such an evil face, if it was erected in the interest of justice and order — an expression of the righteous forces of society. This particular penitentiary struck her as about as bad and wrong as those who were in it; it threw a blight over the whole place and made the river look foul and poisonous, and the opposite bank, with its protrusions of long-necked chimneys, unsightly gasometers, and deposits of rubbish, wear the aspect of a region at whose expense the jail had been populated. She looked up at the dull, closed gates of the place, tightening her grasp of Hyacinth's small hand; and if it was hard to believe anything so blind and deaf and closely fastened would relax itself to let her in, there was a dreadful premonitory sinking of the heart

attached to the idea of its taking the same trouble to let her out. As she hung back, murmuring vague ejaculations, at the very goal of her journey, an incident occurred which fanned all her scruples and reluctances into life again. The child suddenly jerked his hand out of her own, and placing it behind him, in the clutch of the other, said to her, respectfully but resolutely, while he planted himself at a considerable distance: —

"I don't like this place."

"Neither do I like it, my darling," cried the dressmaker, pitifully. "Oh, if you knew how little!"

"Then we will go away. I won't go in."

She would have embraced this proposition with alacrity, if it had not become very vivid to her while she stood there, in the midst of her shrinking, that behind those sullen walls the mother who bore him was even then counting the minutes. She was alive, in that huge < dull tomb, and it seemed to Miss Pynsent that they had already entered into relation with her. They were near her, and she knew it; in a few minutes she would taste the cup of the only mercy (except the reprieve from hanging!) she had known since her fall. A few, a very few minutes would do it, and it seemed to Miss Pynsent that if she should fail of her charity now, the watches of the night, in Lomax Place, would be haunted with remorse and perhaps even with something worse. There was something inside that waited and listened, something that would break, with an awful sound, a shriek, or a curse, if she were to lead the boy away. She looked into his pale face for a moment, perfectly conscious that it would be vain for her to take the tone of command; besides, that would have seemed to her shocking. She had another inspiration, and she said to him in a manner in which she had had occasion to speak before: —

"The reason why we have come is only to be kind. If we are kind we shan't mind its being disagreeable."

"Why should we be kind, if she's a bad woman?" Hyacinth inquired. "She must be very low; I don't want to know her."

"Hush, hush," groaned poor Amanda, edging toward him with clasped hands. "She is not bad now; it has all been washed away — it has been expiated."

"What's expiated?" asked the child, while she almost kneeled down in the dust, catching him to her bosom.

"It's when you have suffered terribly — suffered so much that it has made you good again."

"Has she suffered very much?"

"For years and years. And now she is dying. It proves she is very good now, that she should want to see us."

"Do you mean because we are good?" Hyacinth went on, probing the matter in a way that made his companion quiver, and gazing away from her, very seriously, across the river, at the dreary waste of Battersea.

"We shall be good if we are pitiful, if we make an effort," said the dressmaker, seeming to look up at him rather than down.

"But if she is dying? I don't want to see any one die."

Miss Pynsent was bewildered, but she rejoined, desperately, "If we go to her, perhaps she won't. Maybe we shall save her."

He transferred his remarkable little eyes — eyes which always appeared to her to belong to a person older than herself, to her face; and then he inquired, "Why should I save her, if I don't like her?"

"If she likes you, that will be enough."

At this Miss Pynsent began to see that he was moved. "Will she like me very much?"

"More, much more than any one."

"More than you, now?"

"Oh," said Amanda quickly. "I mean more than she likes any one."

Hyacinth had slipped his hands into the pockets of his scanty knickerbockers, and, with his legs slightly apart, he looked from his companion back to the immense dreary jail. A great deal, to Miss Pynsent's sense, depended on that moment. "Oh, well," he said, at last, "I'll just step in."

"Deary, deary!" the dressmaker murmured to herself, as they crossed the bare semicircle which separated the gateway from the unfrequented street. She exerted herself to pull the bell, which seemed to her terribly big and stiff, and while she waited, again, for the consequences of this effort, the boy broke out, abruptly: —

"How can she like me so much if she doesn't know me?"

Miss Pynsent wished the gate would open before an answer to this question should become imperative, but the people within were a long time coming, and their delay gave Hyacinth an opportunity to repeat it. So the dressmaker rejoined, seizing the first pretext that came into her head, "It's because the little baby she had, of old, was also named Hyacinth."

"That's a queer reason," the boy murmured, staring across again at the Battersea shore.

A moment afterwards they found themselves in a vast interior dimness, with a grinding of keys and bolts going on behind them. Hereupon Miss Pynsent gave herself up to an overruling Providence, and she remembered, later, no circumstance of what happened to her until the great person of Mrs. Bowerbank loomed before her in the narrowness of a strange, dark corridor. She only had a confused impression of being surrounded with high black walls, whose inner face was more dreadful than the other, the one that overlooked the river; of passing through gray, stony courts, in some of which dreadful figures, scarcely female, in hideous brown, misfitting uniforms and perfect frights of hoods, were marching round in a circle; of squeezing up steep, unlighted staircases at the heels of a woman who had taken possession of her at the first stage, and who made incomprehensible remarks to other women, of lumpish aspect, as she saw them erect themselves,

suddenly and spectrally, with dowdy untied bonnets, in uncanny corners and recesses of the draughty labyrinth. If the place had seemed cruel to the poor little dressmaker outside, it may be believed that it did not strike her as an abode of mercy while she pursued her devious way into the circular shafts of cells, where she had an opportunity of looking at captives through grated peepholes, and of edging past others who had temporarily been turned into the corridors — silent women, with fixed eyes, who flattened themselves against the stone walls at the brush of the visitor's dress, and whom Miss Pynsent was afraid to glance at. She never had felt so immured, so made sure of; there were walls within walls and galleries on top of galleries; even the daylight lost its color, and you couldn't imagine what o'clock it was. Mrs. Bowerbank appeared to have failed her, and that made her feel worse; a panic seized her, as she went, in regard to the child. On him, too. the horror of the place would have fallen, and she had a sickening prevision that he would have convulsions after they got home. It was a most improper place to have brought him, no matter who had sent for him, and no matter who was dying. The stillness would terrify him, she was sure — the penitential dumbness of the clustered or isolated women. She clasped his hand more tightly, and she felt him keep close to her, without speaking a word. At last, in an open doorway, darkened by her ample person, Mrs. Bowerbank revealed herself, and Miss Pynsent thought it (afterwards) a sign of her place and power that she should not condescend to apologize for not having appeared till that moment, or to explain why she had not met the bewildered pilgrims near the principal entrance, according to her promise. Miss Pynsent could not embrace the state of mind of people who didn't apologize, though she vaguely envied and admired it, she herself spending much of her time in making excuses for obnoxious acts she had not committed. Mrs. Bowerbank, however, was not arrogant, she was only massive and muscular; and after she had taken her timorous friends in tow, the dressmaker was able to comfort herself with the reflection that even so masterful a woman couldn't inflict anything gratuitously disagreeable on a person who had made her visit in Lomax Place pass off so pleasantly.

It was on the outskirts of the infirmary that she had been hovering, and it was into certain dismal chambers, dedicated to sick criminals, that she presently ushered her companions. These chambers were naked and grated, like all the rest of the place, and caused Miss Pynsent to say to herself that it must be a blessing to be ill in such a place, because you couldn't possibly pick up again, and then your case was simple. Such simplification, however, had for the moment been offered to very few of Florentine's fellow-sufferers, for only three of the small, stiff beds were occupied — occupied by white-faced women in tight, sordid caps, on whom, in the stale, ugly room, the sallow light itself seemed to rest without pity. Mrs. Bowerbank discreetly paid no attention whatever to Hyacinth; she only said to Miss Pynsent, with her hoarse distinctness, "You'll find her very low; she wouldn't have waited another day." And she guided them, through a still further door, to the smallest room of all, where there were but three beds, placed in a row. Miss Pynsent's frightened eyes rather faltered than inquired, but she became aware that a woman was lying on the middle bed, and that her face was turned toward the door. Mrs. Bowerbank led the way straight up to her, and, giving a businesslike pat to her pillow, looked invitation and encouragement to the visitors, who clung together not far within the threshold. Their conductress reminded them that very few minutes were allowed them, and that they had better not dawdle them away; whereupon, as the boy still hung back, the little dressmaker advanced alone, looking at the sick woman with what courage she could muster. It seemed to her that she was approaching a perfect stranger, so completely had nine years of prison transformed Florentine. She felt, immediately, that it was a mercy she hadn't told Hyacinth she was pretty (as she used to be), for there was no beauty left in the hollow, bloodless mask that presented itself without a movement. She had told him that the poor woman was good, but she didn't look so, nor, evidently, was he struck with it as he stared back at her across the interval he declined to traverse, kept (at the same time) from retreating by her strange, fixed eyes, the only portion of all her wasted person in which there was still any appearance of life. She looked unnatural to Amanda Pynsent, and terribly old; a speechless, motionless creature, dazed and stupid, whereas Florentine Vivier, in the obliterated past, had been her ideal of personal, as distinguished from social, brilliancy. Above all she seemed disfigured and ugly, cruelly misrepresented by her coarse cap and short, rough hair. Amanda, as she stood beside her, thought with a sort of scared elation that Hyacinth would never guess that a person in whom there was so little trace of smartness — or of cleverness of any kind — was his mother. At the very most it might occur to him, as Mrs. Bowerbank had suggested, that she was his grandmother. Mrs. Bowerbank seated herself on the further bed, with folded hands, like a monumental timekeeper, and remarked, in the manner of one speaking from a sense of duty, that the poor thing wouldn't get much good of the child, unless he showed more confidence. This observation was evidently lost upon the boy; he was too intensely absorbed in watching the prisoner. A chair had been placed at the head of her bed, and Miss Pynsent sat down without her appearing to notice it. In a moment, however, she lifted her hand a little, pushing it out from under the coverlet, and the dressmaker laid her own hand softly upon it. This gesture elicited no response, but after a little, still gazing at the boy, Florentine murmured, in words no one present was in a position to understand: —

"Dieu de Dieu, gu'il est beau!"

"She won't speak nothing but French since she has been so bad — you can't get a natural word out of her," Mrs. Bowerbank said.

"It used to be so pretty when she spoke English — and so very amusing," Miss Pynsent ventured to announce, with a feeble attempt to brighten up the scene. "I suppose she has forgotten it all."

"She may well have forgotten it — she never gave her tongue much exercise. There was little enough

trouble to keep her from chattering," Mrs. Bowerbank rejoined, giving a twitch to the sick woman's counterpane. Miss Pynsent settled it a little on the other side, and considered, in the same train, that this separation of language was indeed a mercy; for how could it ever come into her small companion's head that he was the offspring of a person who couldn't so much as say good-morning to him? She felt, at the same time, that the scene might have been somewhat less painful if they had been able to communicate with the object of their compassion. As it was, they had too much the air of having been brought together simply to look at each other, and there was a grewsome awkwardness in that, considering the delicacy of Florentine's position. Not, indeed, that she looked much at her old comrade; it was as if she were conscious of Miss Pynsent's being there, and would have been glad to thank her for it — glad even to examine her for her own sake, and see what change, for her, too, the horrible years had brought, but felt, more than this, that she had but the thinnest pulse of energy left, and that not a moment that could still be of use to her was too much to take in her child. She took him in with all the glazed entreaty of her eyes, quite giving up his poor little protectress, who evidently would have to take her gratitude for granted. Hyacinth, on his side, after some moments of embarrassing silence — there was nothing audible but Mrs. Bowerbank's breathing — had satisfied himself, and he turned about to look for a place of patience, while Miss Pynsent should finish her business, which as yet made so 'little show. He appeared to wish, not to leave the room altogether, as that would be a confession of a vanquished spirit, but to take some attitude that should express his complete disapproval of the unpleasant situation. He was not in sympathy, and he could not have made it more clear than by the way he presently went and placed himself on a low stool, in a corner, near the door by which they had entered.

"Est-il possible, man Dieu, qu'il sol gentil comme ca?

" his mother moaned, just above her breath.

"We are very glad you should have cared — that they look after you so well," said Miss Pynsent, confusedly, at random; feeling, first, that Hyacinth's coldness was, perhaps, excessive, and his skepticism too marked, and then that allusions to the way the poor woman was looked after were not exactly happy. They didn't matter, however, for she evidently heard nothing, giving no sign of interest, even when Mrs. Bowerbank, in a tone between a desire to make the interview more lively, and an idea of showing that she knew how to treat the young, referred herself to the little boy.

"Is there nothing the little gentleman would like to say, now, to the unfortunate? Hasn't he any pleasant remark to make to her about his coming so far to see her when she's so sunk? It isn't often that children are shown over the place (as the little man has been), and there's many that would think they were lucky if they could see what he has seen."

"Man pauvre joujou, man pauvre cheri" the prisoner went on, in her tender, tragic whisper.

"He only wants to be very good; he always sits that way at home," said Miss Pynsent, alarmed at Mrs. Bowerbank's address and hoping there wouldn't be a scene.

"He might have stayed at home then — with this wretched person moaning after him," Mrs. Bowerbank remarked, with some sternness. She plainly felt that the occasion threatened to be wanting in brilliancy, and wished to intimate that though she was to be trusted for discipline, she thought they were all getting off too easily.

"I came because Pinnie brought me," Hyacinth declared, from his low perch. "I thought at first it would be pleasant. But it ain't pleasant. I don't like prisons." And he placed his little feet on the cross-piece of the stool, as if to touch the institution at as few points as possible.

The woman in bed continued her strange, almost whining plaint. " II ne veut pas s'approctier; il a honte de moi."

"There's a many that begin like that!" laughed Mrs. Bowerbank, who was irritated by the boy's contempt for one of her Majesty's finest establishments.

Hyacinth's little white face exhibited no confusion; he only turned it to the prisoner again, and Miss Pynsent felt that some extraordinary, dumb exchange of meanings was taking place between, them. "She used to be so elegant; she was a fine woman," she observed, gently and helplessly.

"11 a honte de moi

— il a honte, Dieu le pardonne," Florentine Vivier went on, never moving her eyes.

"She's asking for something, in her language. I used to know a few words," said Miss Pynsent, stroking down the bed, very nervously.

"Who is that woman? what does she want?" Hyacinth asked, his small, clear voice ringing over the dreary room.

"She wants you to come near her, she wants to kiss you, sir," said Mrs. Bowerbank, as if it were more than he deserved.

"I won't kiss her; Pinnie says she stole a watch!" the child answered, with resolution.

"Oh, you dreadful — how could you ever!" cried Pinnie, blushing all over and starting out of her chair.

It was partly Amanda's agitation, perhaps, which, by the jolt it administered, gave an impulse to the sick woman, and partly the penetrating and expressive tone in which Hyacinth announced his repugnance: at any rate, Florentine, in the most unexpected and violent manner, jerked herself up from her pillow, and, with dilated eyes and waving hands, shrieked out, "Ah, quelle infamie! I never stole a watch, I never stole anything — anything! Ah, par exemple!" Then she fell back, sobbing with the passion that had given her a moment's

strength.

"I'm sure you needn't put more on her than she has by rights," said Mrs. Bowerbank, with dignity, to the dressmaker, laying a large red hand upon the patient, to keep her in her place.

"Mercy, more? I thought it so much less!" cried Miss Pynsent, convulsed with confusion and jerking herself, in a wild tremor, from the mother to the child, as if she wished to fling herself upon one for contrition and upon the other for revenge.

"II a honte de moi

— il a honte de moi!" Florentine repeated, in the misery of her sobs, "Dieu de bonte, quelle horreur!"

Miss Pynsent dropped on her knees beside the bed, and trying to possess herself of Florentine's hand again, protested with a passion almost equal to that of the prisoner (she felt that her nerves had been screwed up to the snapping-point, and now they were all in shreds) that she hadn't meant what she had told the child, that he hadn't understood, that Florentine herself hadn't understood, that she had only said she had been accused and meant that no one had ever believed it. The Frenchwoman paid no attention to her whatever, and Amanda buried her face and her embarrassment in the side of the hard little prison-bed, while, above the sound of their common lamentation, she heard the judicial tones of Mrs. Bowerbank.

"The child is delicate, you might well say! I'm disappointed in the effect — I was in hopes you 'd hearten her up. The doctor'll be down on me, of course; so we'll just pass out again."

"I'm very sorry I made you cry. And you must excuse Pinnie — I asked her so many questions."

These words came from close beside the prostrate dressmaker, who, lifting herself quickly, found the little boy had advanced to her elbow and was taking a nearer view of the mysterious captive. They produced upon the latter an effect even more powerful than his unfortunate speech of a moment before; for she found strength to raise herself, partly, in her bed again, and to hold out her arms to him, with the same thrilling sobs. She was talking still, but she had become quite inarticulate, and Miss Pynsent had but a glimpse of her white, ravaged face, with the hollows of its eyes and the rude crop of her hair. Amanda caught the child with an eagerness almost as great as Florentine's, and, drawing him to the head of the bed, pushed him into his mother's arms. "Kiss her — kiss her, and we'll go home!" she whispered desperately, while they closed about him, and the poor dishonored head pressed itself against his little cheek. It was a terrible, tremendous embrace, to which Hyacinth submitted with instant patience. Mrs. Bowerbank had tried at first to keep her protegee from rising, evidently wishing to abbreviate the scene; then, as the child was enfolded, she accepted the situation and gave judicious support from behind, with an eye to clearing the room as soon as this effort should have spent itself. She propped up her patient with a vigorous arm: Miss Pynsent rose from her knees and turned away, and there was a minute's stillness, during which the boy accommodated himself as he might to his strange ordeal. What thoughts were begotten at that moment in his wondering little mind Miss Pynsent was destined to learn at another time. Before she had faced round to the bed again she was swept out of the room by Mrs. Bowerbank, who had lowered the prisoner, exhausted, with closed eyes, to her pillow, and given Hyacinth a businesslike little push, which sent him on in advance. Miss Pynsent went home in a cab — she was so shaken; though she reflected, very nervously, on getting into it, on the opportunities it would give Hyacinth for the exercise of inquisitorial rights. To her surprise, however, he completely neglected them; he sat in silence, looking out of the window, till they reentered Lomax Place.

Chapter IV

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"WELL, YOU'LL have to guess my reason before I'll tell you," the girl said, with a free laugh, pushing her way into the narrow hall and leaning against the tattered wall-paper, which, representing blocks of marble with beveled edges, in streaks and speckles of black and gray, had not been renewed for years, and came back to her out of the past. As Miss Pynsent closed the door, seeing her visitor was so resolute, the light filtered in from the street, through the narrow, dusty glass above it, and then the very smell and sense of the place returned to Millicent; a kind of musty dimness, with the vision of a small, steep staircase at the end, covered with a strip of oilcloth which she recognized, and made a little less dark by a window in the bend (you could see it from the hall), from which you could almost bump your head against the house behind. Nothing was changed except Miss Pynsent, and of course the girl herself. She had noticed, outside, that the sign between the windows had not even been touched up; there was still the same preposterous announcement of "fashionable bonnets" — as if the poor little dressmaker had the slightest acquaintance with that style of headdress, of which Miss Henning's own knowledge was now so complete. She could see Miss Pynsent was looking at her hat, which was a wonderful composition of flowers and ribbons; her eyes had traveled up and down Millicent's whole person, but they rested in fascination upon that ornament. The girl had forgotten how small the dressmaker was; she barely came up to her shoulder. She had lost her hair, and wore a cap, which Millicent noticed, in return, wondering if that were a specimen of what she thought the fashion. Miss Pynsent stared up at her as if she had been six feet high; but she was used to that sort of surprised admiration, being perfectly conscious that she was a magnificent young woman.

“Won’t you take me into your-shop?” she asked. “I don’t want to-order anything; I only want to inquire after your ‘ealth: and isn’t this rather an awkward place to talk?” She made her way further in, without waiting for permission, seeing that her startled hostess had not yet guessed.

“The showroom is on the right hand,” said Miss Pynsent, with her professional manner, which was intended, evidently, to mark a difference. She spoke as if on the other side, where the horizon was bounded by the partition of the next house, there were labyrinths of apartments. Passing in after her guest, she found the young lady already spread out upon the sofa, the everlasting sofa, in the right-hand corner as you faced the window, covered with a light, shrunken shroud of a strange yellow stuff, the tinge of which revealed years of washing, and surmounted by a colored print of Rebekah at the Well, balancing, in the opposite quarter, with a portrait of the Empress of the French, taken from an illustrated newspaper, and framed and glazed in the manner of 1853. Millicent looked about her, asking herself what Miss Pynsent had to show, and acting perfectly the part of the most brilliant figure the place had ever contained. The old implements were there on the table: the pincushions and needle-books; the pink measuring-tape with which, as children, she and Hyacinth used to take each other’s height; and the same collection of fashion-plates (she could see in a minute), crumpled, sallow, and fly-blown. The little dressmaker bristled, as she used to do, with needles and pins (they were stuck all over the front of her dress), but there were no rustling fabrics tossed in heaps about the room — nothing but the skirt of; a shabby dress (it might have been her own), which she was evidently repairing, and had flung upon the table when she came to the door. Miss Kenning speedily arrived at the conclusion that her hostess’s business had not increased, and felt a kind of good-humored, luxurious scorn of a person who knew so little what was to be got out of London. It was Millicent’s belief that she herself was already perfectly acquainted with the resources of the metropolis.

“Now tell me, how Is Hyacinth? I should like so much to see him,” she remarked, extending a pair of large, protrusive feet, and supporting herself on ‘the sofa by her hands.

“Hyacinth”?” Miss Pynsent repeated, with majestic blankness, as if she had never heard of such a person. She felt that the girl was cruelly, scathingly, well dressed; she couldn’t imagine who she was, nor with what design she could have presented herself.

“Perhaps you call him Mr. Robinson, to-day — you always wanted him to hold himself so high. But to his face, at any rate, I’ll call him as I used to: you see if I don’t!”

“Bless my soul, you must be the little ‘Enning!” Miss Pynsent exclaimed, planted before her, and going now into every detail.

“Well, I’m glad you have made up your mind. I thought you ‘d know me directly. I had a call to make in this part, and it came into my ‘ead to look you up. I don’t like to lose sight of old friends.”

“I never knew you — you’ve improved so,” Miss Pynsent rejoined, with a candor justified by her age and her consciousness of respectability.

“Well, you haven’t changed; you were always calling me something horrid.”

“I dare say it doesn’t matter to you now, does it?” said the dressmaker, seating herself, but quite unable to take up her work, absorbed as she was in the examination of her visitor.

“Oh, I’m all right now,” Miss Henning replied, with the air of one who had nothing to fear from human judgments.

“You were a pretty child — I never said the contrary to that: but I had no idea you ‘d turn out like this. You ‘re too tall for a woman,” Miss Pynsent added, much divided between an old prejudice and a new appreciation.

“Well, I enjoy beautiful ‘ealth,” said the young lady; “every one thinks I’m twenty.” She spoke with a certain artless pride in her bigness and her bloom, and as if, to show her development, she would have taken off her jacket or let you feel her forearm. She was very handsome, with a shining, bold, goodnatured eye, a flue, free, facial oval, an abundance of brown hair, and a smile which showed the whiteness of her teeth. Her head was set upon a fair, strong neck, and her tall young figure was rich in feminine curves. Her gloves, covering her wrists insufficiently, showed the redness of those parts, in the interstices of the numerous silver bracelets that encircled them, and Miss Pynsent made the observation that her hands were not more delicate than her feet. She was not graceful, and even the little dressmaker, whose preference for distinguished forms never deserted her, indulged in the mental reflection that she was common, for all her magnificence; but there was something about her indescribably fresh, successful, and satisfying. She was, to her blunt, expanded fingertips, a daughter of London, of the crowded streets and hustling traffic of the great city; she had drawn her health and strength from its dingy courts and foggy thoroughfares, and peopled its parks and squares and crescents with her ambitions; it had entered into her blood and her bone, the sound of her voice and the carriage of her head; she understood it by instinct and loved it with passion; she represented its immense vulgarities and curiosities, its brutality and its knowingness, its goodnature and its impudence, and might have figured, in an allegorical procession, as a kind of glorified towns-’woman, a nymph of the wilderness of Middlesex, a flower of the accumulated parishes, the genius of urban civilization, the muse of cockneyism. The restrictions under which Miss Pynsent regarded her would have cost the dressmaker some fewer scruples if she had guessed the impression she made upon Millicent, and how the whole place seemed to that prosperous young lady to smell of poverty and failure. Her childish image of Miss Pynsent had represented her as delicate and dainty, with round loops of hair fastened on her temples by combs, and associations of brilliancy arising

from the constant manipulation of precious stuffs — tissues, at least, which Millicent regarded with envy. But the little woman before her was bald and white and pinched; she looked shrunken and sickly and insufficiently nourished; her small eyes were sharp and suspicious, and her hideous cap did not disguise her meagreness. Miss Henning thanked her stars, as she had often done before, that she had not been obliged to get her living by drudging over needlework year after year in that undiscoverable street, in a dismal little room where nothing had been changed for ages; the absence of change had such an exasperating effect upon her vigorous young nature. She reflected with complacency upon her good fortune in being attached to a more exciting, a more dramatic, department of the dressmaking business, and noticed that, though it was already November, there was no fire in the neatly-kept grate beneath the chimneypiece, on which a design, partly architectural, partly botanical, executed in the hair of Miss Pynsent's parents, was flanked by a pair of vases, under glass, containing muslin flowers.

If she thought Miss Pynsent's eyes suspicious, it must be confessed that this lady felt very much upon her guard in the presence of so unexpected and undesired a reminder of one of the least honorable episodes in the annals of Lomax Place. Miss Pynsent esteemed people in proportion to their success in constituting a family circle — in cases, that is, when the materials were under their hand. This success, among the various members of the house of Henning, had been of the scantiest, and the domestic broils in the establishment adjacent to her own, whose vicissitudes she was able to follow, as she sat at her window at work, by simply inclining an ear to the thin partition behind her — these scenes, amid which the crash of crockery and the imprecations of the wounded were frequently audible, had long been the scandal of a humble but harmonious neighborhood. Mr. Henning was supposed to occupy a place of confidence in a brush-factory, while his wife, at home, occupied herself with the washing and mending of a considerable brood, mainly of sons. But economy and sobriety, and indeed a virtue more important still, had never presided at their councils. The freedom and frequency of Mrs. Henning's relations with a stove-polisher in the Euston Road were at least not a secret to a person who lived next door, and looked up from her work so often that it was a wonder it was always finished so quickly. The little Hennings, unwashed and unchidden, spent most of their time either in pushing each other into the gutter, or in running to the public house at the corner for a pennyworth of gin, and the borrowing propensities of their elders were a theme for exclamation. There was no object of personal or domestic use which Mrs. Henning had not at one time or another endeavored to elicit from the dressmaker; beginning with a mattress, on an occasion when she was about to take to her bed for a considerable period, and ending with a flannel petticoat and a pewter teapot. Lomax Place had, eventually, from its overpeeping windows and doorways, been present at the seizure, by a long-suffering landlord, of the chattels of this interesting family, and at the ejectment of the whole insolvent group, who departed in a straggling, jeering, unabashed, cynical manner, carrying with them but little of the sympathy of the street. Millicent, whose childish intimacy with Hyacinth Robinson Miss Pynsent had always viewed with vague anxiety — she thought the girl a "nasty little thing," and was afraid she would teach the innocent orphan tricks — Millicent, with her luxuriant tresses, her precocious beauty, her staring, mocking manner on the doorstep, was at this time twelve years of age. She vanished with her vanishing companions. Lomax Place saw them turn the corner, and returned to its occupations with a conviction that they would make shipwreck on the outer reefs. But neither spar nor splinter floated back to their former haunts, and they were engulfed altogether in the fathomless deeps of the town. Miss Pynsent drew a long breath; it was her conviction that none of them would come to any good, and Millicent least of all.

When, therefore, this young lady reappeared, with all the signs of accomplished survival, she could not fail to ask herself whether, under a specious seeming, the phenomenon did not simply represent the triumph of vice. She was alarmed, but she would have given her silver thimble to know the girl's history, and between her alarm and her curiosity she passed an uncomfortable half hour. She felt that the familiar, mysterious creature was playing with her; revenging herself for former animadversions, for having been snubbed and miscalled by a peering little spinster who now could make no figure beside her. If it were not the triumph of vice, it was at least the triumph of impertinence, as well as of youth, health, and a greater acquaintance with the art of dress than Miss Pynsent could boast, for all her ridiculous signboards. She perceived, or she believed she perceived, that Millicent wanted to scare her, to make her think she had come after Hyacinth; that she wished to inveigle, to corrupt him. I should be sorry to impute to Miss Henning any motive more complicated than the desire to amuse herself, of a Saturday afternoon, by a ramble which her vigorous legs had no occasion to deprecate; but it must be confessed that when it occurred to her that Miss Pynsent regarded her as a ravening wolf and her early playmate as an unspotted lamb, she laughed out, in her hostess's anxious face, irrelevantly and good-hurnoredly, without deigning to explain. But what, indeed, had she come for, if she had not come after Hyacinth? It was not for the love of the dressmaker's pretty ways. She remembered the boy and some of their tender passages, and in the wantonness of her fullblown freedom — her attachment, also, to any tolerable pretext for wandering through the streets of London and gazing into shopwindows — she had said to herself that she would dedicate an afternoon to the pleasures of memory, would revisit the scenes of her childhood. She considered that her childhood had ended with the departure of her family from Lomax Place. If the tenants of that obscure locality never learned what their banished fellows went through, Millicent retained a deep impression of those horrible intermediate years. The family, as a family, had gone downhill, to the very bottom; and in her humbler moments Millicent sometimes wondered what lucky star had checked her own descent, and indeed enabled her to mount the slope again. In her humbler moments, I say, for as a general

thing she was provided with an explanation of any good fortune that might befall her. What was more natural than that a girl should do well when she was at once so handsome and so clever? Millicent thought with compassion of the young persons whom a niggardly fate had endowed with only one of these advantages. She was goodnatured, but she had no idea of gratifying Miss Pynsent's curiosity; it seemed to her quite a sufficient kindness to stimulate it.

She told the dressmaker that she had a high position at a great haberdasher's in the Buckingham Palace Road; she was in the department for jackets and mantles; she put on all these articles to show them off to the customers, and on her person they appeared to such advantage that nothing she took up ever failed to go off. Miss Pynsent could imagine, from this, how highly her services were prized. She had had a splendid offer from another establishment, in Oxford Street, and she was just thinking whether she should accept it. "We have to be beautifully dressed, but I don't care, because I like to look nice," she remarked to her hostess, who at the end of half an hour, very grave, behind the clumsy glasses which she had been obliged to wear of late years, seemed still not to know what to make of her. On the subject of her family, of her history during the interval that was to be accounted for, the girl was large and vague, and Miss Pynsent saw that the domestic circle had not even a shadow of sanctity for her. She stood on her own feet, and she stood very firm. Her staying so long, her remaining over the half hour, proved to the dressmaker that she had come for Hyacinth; for poor Amanda gave her as little information as was decent, told her nothing that would encourage or attract. She simply mentioned that Mr. Robinson (she was careful to speak of him in that manner) had given his attention to book-bindery, and had served an apprenticeship at an establishment where they turned out the best work of that kind that was to be found in London.

"Bookbindery? Laws!" said Miss Henning. "Do you mean they get them up for the shops? Well, I always thought he would have something to do with books." Then she added, "But I didn't think he would ever follow a trade."

"A trade?" cried Miss Pynsent. "You should hear Mr. Robinson speak of it. He considers it one of the fine arts."

Millicent smiled, as if she knew how people often considered things, and remarked that very likely it was tidy, comfortable work, but she couldn't believe there was much to be seen in it. "Perhaps you will say there is more than there is here," she went on, finding at last an effect of irritation, of reprehension, an implication of aggressive respectability, in the image of the patient dressmaker, sitting for so many years in her close brown little dress, with the foggy familiarities of Lomax Place on the other side of the pane. Millicent liked to think that she herself was strong, and she was not strong enough for that.

This allusion to her shrunken industry seemed to Miss Pynsent very cruel; but she reflected that it was natural one should be insulted if one talked to a vulgar girl. She judged this young lady in the manner of a person who was not vulgar herself, and if there was a difference between them, she was right in feeling it to be in her favor. Miss Pynsent's "cut," as I have intimated, was not truly fashionable, and in the application of gimp and the distribution of ornament she was not to be trusted; but, morally, she had the best taste in the world. "I have n 't so much work as I used to have, if that's what you mean. My eyes are not so good, and my health has failed with advancing years."

I know not to what extent Millicent was touched by the dignity of this admission, but she replied, without embarrassment, that what Miss Pynsent wanted was a smart young assistant, some nice girl with a pretty taste, who would brighten up the business and give her new ideas. "I can see you have got the same old ones, always: I can tell that by the way you have stuck the braid on that dress," and she directed a poke of her neat little umbrella to the drapery in the dressmaker's lap. She continued to patronize and exasperate her. and to offer her consolation and encouragement with the heaviest hand that had ever been applied to Miss Pynsent's sensitive surface. Poor Amanda ended by gazing at her as if she were a public performer of some kind, a ballad-singer or a conjurer, and went so far as to ask herself whether the hussy could be (in her own mind) the "nice girl" who was to regild the tarnished sign. Miss Pynsent had had assistants, in the past — she had even, once, for a few months, had a "forewoman;" and some of these damsels had been precious specimens, whose misdemeanors lived vividly in her memory. Never, all the same, in her worst hour of delusion, had she trusted her interests to such an extravagant baggage as this. She was quickly reassured as to Millicent's own views, perceiving more and more that she was a tremendous high-flyer, who required a much larger field of action than the musty bower she now honored, Heaven only knew why, with her presence. Miss Pynsent held her tongue, as she always did, when the sorrow of her life had been touched, the thought of the slow, inexorable decline on which she had entered that day, nearly ten years before, when her hesitations and scruples resolved themselves into a hideous mistake. The deep conviction of error, on that unspeakably important occasion, had ached and throbbed within her ever since like an incurable disease. She had sown in her boy's mind the seeds of shame and rancor; she had made him conscious of his stigma, of his exquisitely vulnerable spot, and condemned him to know that for him the sun would never shine as it shone for most others. By the time he was sixteen years old she had learned — or believed she had learned — the judgment he passed upon her, and at that period she had lived through a series of horrible months, an ordeal in which every element of her old prosperity perished. She cried her eyes out, on coming to a sense of her aberration, blinded and weakened herself with weeping, so that, for a moment, it seemed as if she should never be able to touch a needle again. She lost all interest in her work, and that artistic imagination which had always been her pride deserted her,

together with the reputation of keeping the tidiest lodgings in Lomax Place. A couple of commercial gentlemen and a Scotch plumber, of religious tendencies, who for several years had made her establishment their home, withdrew their patronage on the ground that the airing of her beds was not what it used to be, and disseminated cruelly this injurious legend. She ceased to notice or to care how sleeves were worn, and on the question of flounces and gores her mind was a blank. She fell into a grievous debility, and then into a long, low, languid fever, during which Hyacinth tended her with a devotion which only made the wrong she had done him seem more bitter, and in which, so soon as she was able to hold up her head a little, Mr. Vetch came and sat with her through the dull hours of convalescence. She reestablished to a certain extent, after a while, her connection, so far as the letting of her rooms was concerned (from the other department of her activity the tide had ebbed apparently forever); but nothing was the same again, and she knew it was the beginning of the end. So it had gone on, and she watched the end approach; she felt it was very near indeed when a child she had seen playing in the gutters came to flaunt it over her in silk and lace. She gave a low, inaudible sigh of relief when at last Millicent got up and stood before her, smoothing the glossy cylinder of her umbrella.

"Mind you give my love to Hyacinth," the girl said, with an assurance which showed all her insensibility to tacit protests. "I don't care if you do guess that if I have stopped so long it was in the hope he would be dropping in to his tea. You can tell him I sat an hour, on purpose, if you like; there's no shame in my wanting to see my little friend. He may know I call him that!" Millicent continued, with her showroom laugh, as Miss Pynsent judged it to be; conferring these permissions, successively, as if they were great indulgences. "Do give him my love, and tell him I hope he'll come and see me. I see you won't tell him anything. I don't know what you 're afraid of; but I'll leave my card for him, all the same." She drew forth a little bright-colored pocketbook, and it was with amazement that Miss Pynsent saw her extract from it a morsel of engraved pasteboard — so monstrous did it seem that one of the squalid little Hennings should have lived to display this emblem of social consideration. Millicent enjoyed the effect she produced as she laid the card on the table, and gave another ringing peal of merriment at the sight of her hostess's half-hungry, half-astonished look. "What do you think I want to do with him? I could swallow him at a single bite!" she cried.

Poor Amanda gave no second glance at the document on the table, though she had perceived it contained, in the corner, her visitor's address, which Millicent had amused herself, ingeniously, with not mentioning: she only got up, laying down her work with a trembling hand, so that she should be able to see Miss Henning well out of the house. "You needn't think I shall put myself out to keep him in the dark. I shall certainly tell him you have been here, and exactly how you strike me."

"Of course you'll say something nasty — like you used to when I was a child. You let me 'ave it then, you know!"

"Ah, well," said Miss Pynsent, nettled at being reminded of an acerbity which the girl's present development caused to appear ridiculously ineffectual, "you are very different now, when I think what you've come from."

"What I've come from?" Millicent threw back her head, and opened her eyes very wide, while all her feathers and ribbons nodded. "Did you want me to stick fast in this low place for the rest of my days? You have had to stay in it yourself, so you might speak civilly of it." She colored, and raised her voice, and looked magnificent in her scorn. "And pray what have you come from yourself, and what has he come from — the mysterious 'Mr. Robinson,' that used to be such a puzzle to the whole Place? I thought perhaps I might clear it up, but you haven't told me that yet!"

Miss Pynsent turned straight away, covering her ears with her hands. "I have nothing to tell you! Leave my room — leave my house!" she cried, with a trembling voice.

Chapter V

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IT WAS IN this way that the dressmaker failed either to see or to hear the opening of the door of the room, which obeyed a slow, apparently cautious impulse given it from the hall, and revealed the figure of a young man standing there, with a short pipe in his teeth. There was something in his face which immediately told Millicent Henning that he had heard, outside, her last resounding tones. He entered as if, young as he was, he knew that when women were squabbling men were not called upon to be headlong, and evidently wondered who the dressmaker's brilliant adversary might be. She recognized on the instant her old playmate, and without reflection, confusion, or diplomacy, in the fullness of her vulgarity and sociability, she exclaimed, in no lower pitch, "Gracious, Hyacinth Robinson, is that your style?"

Miss Pynsent turned round, in a flash, but kept silent; then, very white and trembling, took up her work again, and seated herself in her window.

Hyacinth Robinson stood staring; then he blushed all over. He knew who she was, but he didn't say so; he only asked, in a voice which struck the girl as quite different from the old one — the one in which he used to tell her she was beastly tiresome— "Is it of me you were speaking just now?"

"When I asked where you had come from? That was because we 'eard you in the 'all," said Millicent,

smiling. “I suppose you have come from your work.”

“You used to live in the Place — you always wanted to kiss me,” the young man remarked, with an effort not to show all the surprise and agitation that he felt. “Didn’t she live in the Place, Pinnie!”

Pinnie, for all answer, fixed a pair of strange, pleading eyes upon him, and Millicent broke out, with her recurrent laugh, in which the dressmaker had been right in discovering the note of affectation, “Do you want to know what you look like? You look for all the world like a little Frenchman! Don’t he look like a little Frenchman, Miss Pynsent?” she went on, as if she were on the best possible terms with the mistress of the establishment.

Hyacinth exchanged a look with that afflicted woman; he saw something in her face which he knew very well by this time, and the sight of which always gave him an odd, perverse, unholy satisfaction. It seemed to say that she prostrated herself, that she did penance in the dust, that she was his to trample upon, to spit upon. He did neither of these things, but she was constantly offering herself, and her permanent humility, her perpetual abjection, was a sort of counter-irritant to the soreness lodged in his own heart forever, which had often made him cry with rage at night, in his little room under the roof. Pinnie meant that, to-day, as a matter of course, and she could only especially mean it in the presence of Miss Henning’s remark about his looking like a Frenchman. He knew he looked like a Frenchman, he had often been told so before, and a large part of the time he felt like one — like one of those he had read about in Michelet and Carlyle. He had picked up the French tongue with the most extraordinary facility, with the aid of one of his mates, a refugee from Paris, in the workroom, and of a second-hand dog’s-eared dictionary, bought for a shilling in the Brompton Road, in one of his interminable, restless, melancholy, moody, yet all-observant strolls through London. He spoke it (as he believed) as if by instinct, caught the accent, the gesture, the movement of eyebrow and shoulder; so that if it should become necessary, in certain contingencies, that he should pass for a foreigner, he had an idea that he might do so triumphantly, once he could borrow a blouse. He had never seen a blouse in his life, but he knew exactly the form and color of such a garment, and how it was worn. What these contingencies might be which should compel him to assume the disguise of a person of a social station lower still than his own, Hyacinth would not for the world have mentioned to you; but as they were very present to the mind of our imaginative, ingenious youth, we shall catch a glimpse of them in the course of a further acquaintance with him. At the present moment, when there was no question of masquerading, it made him blush again that such a note should be struck by a loud, laughing, handsome girl, who came back out of his past. There was more in Pinnie’s weak eyes, now, than her usual profusion; there was a dumb intimation, almost as pathetic as the other, that if he cared to let her off easily he would not detain their terrible visitor very long. He had no wish to do that; he kept the door open, on purpose; he didn’t enjoy talking to girls under Pinnie’s eyes, and he could see that this one had every disposition to talk. So without responding to her observation about his appearance, he said, not knowing exactly what to say, “Have you come back to live in the Place?”

“Heaven forbid I should ever do that!” cried Miss Henning, with genuine emotion. “I have to live near the establishment in which I’m employed.”

“And what establishment is that, now?” the young man asked, gaining confidence, and perceiving, in detail, how handsome she was. He hadn’t roamed about London for nothing, and he knew that when a girl was so handsome as that, a jocular tone of address, a pleasing freedom, was de rigueur; so he added, “Is it the Bull and Gate, or the Elephant and Castle?”

“A public house? Well, you haven’t got the politeness of a Frenchman, at all events!” Her goodnature had come back to her perfectly, and her resentment of his imputation of her looking like a barmaid — a blowzy beauty who handled pewter — was tempered by her more and more curious consideration of Hyacinth’s style. He was exceedingly “rum,” but this quality took her fancy, and since he remembered so well that she had been fond of kissing him, in their early days, she would have liked to say to him that she stood prepared to repeat this form of attention. But she reminded herself, in time, that her line should be, religiously, the ladylike, and she was content to exclaim, simply, “I don’t care what a man looks like so long as he’s clever. That’s the style I like!”

Miss Pynsent had promised herself the satisfaction of taking no further notice of her brilliant invader; but the temptation was great to expose her to Hyacinth, as a mitigation of her brilliancy, by remarking sarcastically, according to opportunity, “Miss ‘Enning wouldn’t live in Lomax Place for the world. She thinks it too abominably low.”

“So it is; it’s a beastly hole,” said the young man.

The poor dressmaker’s little dart fell to the ground, and Millicent exclaimed, jovially, “Right you are!” while she directed to the object of her childhood’s admiration a smile that put him more and more at his ease.

“Don’t you suppose I’m clever?” he asked, planted before her with his little legs slightly apart, while, with his hands behind him, he made the open door waver to and fro.

“You? Oh, I don’t care whether you are or not!” said Millicent Henning; and Hyacinth was at any rate quick-witted enough to see what she meant by that. If she meant he was so goodlooking that he might pass on this score alone, her judgment was conceivable, though many women would strongly have dissented from it. He was as small as he had threatened — he had never got his growth — and she could easily see that he was not what she, at least, would call strong. His bones were small, his chest was narrow, his complexion pale, his whole figure almost childishly slight; and Millicent perceived afterward that he had a very delicate hand — the

hand, as she said to herself, of a gentleman. What she liked was his face, and something jaunty and entertaining, almost theatrical, in his whole little person. Miss Henning was not acquainted with any member of the dramatic profession, but she supposed, vaguely, that that was the way an actor would look in private life. Hyacinth's features were perfect; his eyes, large and much divided, had as their usual expression a kind of witty candor, and a small, soft, fair mustache disposed itself upon his upper lip in a Way that made him look as if he were smiling even when his heart was heavy. The waves of his dense, fine hair clustered round a forehead which was high enough to suggest remarkable things, and Miss Henning had observed that when he first appeared he wore his little soft circular hat in a way that left these frontal locks very visible. He was dressed in an old brown velveteen jacket, and wore exactly the bright-colored necktie which Miss Pynsent's quick fingers used of old to shape out of hoarded remnants of silk and muslin. He was shabby and work-stained, but the observant eye would have noted an idea in his dress (his appearance was plainly not a matter of indifference to himself), and a painter (not of the heroic) would have liked to make a sketch of him. There was something exotic about him, and yet, with his sharp young face, destitute of bloom, but not of sweetness, and a certain conscious cockneyism which pervaded him, he was as strikingly as Millicent, in her own degree, a product of the London streets and the London air. He looked both ingenuous and slightly wasted, amused, amusing, and indefinably sad. Women had always found him touching; yet he made them — so they had repeatedly assured him — die of laughing.

"I think you had better shut the door," said Miss Pynsent, meaning that he had better shut their departing visitor out.

"Did you come here on purpose to see us?" Hyacinth asked, not heeding this injunction, of which he divined the spirit, and wishing the girl would take her leave, so that he might go out again with her. He should like talking with her much better away from Pinnie, who evidently was ready to stick a bodkin into her, for reasons he perfectly understood. He had seen plenty of them before, Pinnie's reasons, even where girls were concerned who were not nearly so goodlooking as this one. She was always in a fearful "funk" about some woman getting hold of him, and persuading him to make a marriage beneath his station. His station! — poor Hyacinth had often asked himself, and Miss Pynsent, what it could possibly be. He had thought of it bitterly enough, and wondered how in the world he could marry "beneath" it. He would never marry at all — to that his mind was absolutely made up; he would never hand on to another the burden which had made his own young spirit so intolerably sore, the inheritance which had darkened the whole threshold of his manhood. All the more reason why he should have his compensation; why, if the soft society of women was to be enjoyed on other terms, he should cultivate it with a bold, free mind.

"I thought I would just give a look at the old shop; I had an engagement not far off," Millicent said. "But I wouldn't have believed any one who had told me I should find you just where I left you."

"We needed you to look after us!" Miss Pynsent exclaimed, irrepressibly.

"Oh, you 're such a swell yourself!" Hyacinth said, without heeding the dressmaker.

"None of your impudence! I'm as good a girl as there is in London!" And to corroborate this, Miss Henning went on: "If you were to offer to see me a part of the way home, I should tell you I don't knock about that way with gentlemen."

"I'll go with you as far as you like," Hyacinth replied, simply, as if he knew how to treat that sort of speech.

"Well, it's only because I knew you as a baby!" And they went out together, Hyacinth careful not to look at poor Pinnie at all (he felt her glaring whitely and tearfully at him out of her dim corner — it had by this time grown too dusky to work without a lamp), and his companion giving her an outrageously friendly nod of farewell over her shoulder.

It was a long walk from Lomax Place to the quarter of the town in which (to be near the haberdasher's in the Buckingham Palace Road) Miss Henning occupied a modest back-room; but the influences of the hour were such as to make the excursion very agreeable to our young man, who liked the streets at all times, but especially at nightfall, in the autumn, of a Saturday, when, in the vulgar districts,. the smaller shops and open-air industries were doubly active, and big, clumsy torches flared and smoked over handcarts and costermonger's barrows, drawn up in the gutters. Hyacinth had roamed through the great city since he was an urchin, but his imagination had never ceased to be stirred by the preparations for Sunday that went on in the evening among the toilers and spinners, his brothers and sisters, and he lost himself in all the quickened crowding and pushing and staring at lighted windows, and chaffering at the stalls of fishmongers and hucksters. He liked the people who looked as if they had got their week's wage, and were prepared to lay it out discreetly; and even those whose use of it would plainly be extravagant and intemperate; and, best of all, those who evidently hadn't received it at all, and who wandered about, disinterestedly, vaguely, with their hands in empty pockets, watching others make their bargains and fill their satchels, or staring at the striated sides of bacon, at the golden cubes and triangles of cheese, at the graceful festoons of sausage, in the most brilliant of the windows. He liked the reflection of the lamps on the wet pavements, the feeling and smell of the carboniferous London damp; the way the winter fog blurred and suffused the whole place made it seem bigger and more crowded, produced halos and dim radiations, trickles and evaporation, on the plates of glass. He moved in the midst of these impressions this evening, but he enjoyed them in silence, with an attention taken up mainly by his companion, and pleased to be already so intimate with a young lady whom people turned round to look at. She herself affected to speak of the rush and crush of the week's end with disgust: she said

she liked the streets, but she liked the respectable ones; she couldn't abide the smell of fish, and the whole place seemed full of it, so that she hoped they would soon get into the Edgware Road, towards which they tended and which was a proper street for a lady. To Hyacinth she appeared to have no connection with the long-haired little girl who, in Lomax Place, years before, was always hugging a smutty doll and courting his society; she was like a stranger, a new acquaintance, and he observed her curiously, wondering by what transitions she had reached her present pitch.

She enlightened him but little on this point, though she talked a great deal on a variety of subjects, and mentioned to him her habits, her aspirations, her likes and dislikes. The latter were very numerous. She was tremendously particular, difficult to please, he could see that; and she assured him that she never put up with anything a moment after it had ceased to be agreeable to her. Especially was she particular about gentlemen's society, and she made it plain that a young fellow who wanted to have anything to say to her must be in receipt of wages amounting at the least to fifty shillings a week. Hyacinth told her that he didn't earn that, as yet; and she remarked again that she made an exception for him, because she knew all about him (or if not all, at least a great deal), and he could see that her goodnature was equal to her beauty. She made such an exception that when, after they were moving down the Edgware Road (which had still the-brightness of late closing, but with more nobleness), he proposed that she should enter a coffee-house with him and "take something" (he could hardly tell himself, afterwards, what brought him to this point) she acceded without a demur — without a demur even on the ground of his slender earnings. Slender as they were, Hyacinth had them in his pocket (they had been destined in some degree for Pinnie), and he felt equal to the occasion. Millicent partook profusely of tea and bread and butter, with a relish of raspberry jam, and thought the place most comfortable, though he himself, after finding himself ensconced, was visited by doubts as to its respectability, suggested, among other things, by photographs, on the walls, of young ladies in tights. Hyacinth himself was hungry, he had not yet had his tea, but he was too excited, too preoccupied, to eat; the situation made him restless and gave him palpitations; it seemed to be the beginning of something new. He had never yet "stood" even a glass of beer to a girl of Millicent's stamp — a girl who rustled and glittered and smelt of musk — and if she should turn out as jolly a specimen of the sex as she seemed it might make a great difference in his leisure hours, in his evenings, which were often very dull. That it would also make a difference in his savings (he was under a pledge to Pinnie and to Mr. Vetch to put by something every week) it didn't concern him, for the moment, to reflect; and indeed, though he thought it odious and insufferable to be poor, the ways and means of becoming rich had hitherto not greatly occupied him. He knew what Millicent's age must be, but felt, nevertheless, as if she were older, much older, than himself — she appeared to know so much about London and about life; and this made it still more of a sensation to be entertaining her like a young swell. He thought of it, too, in connection with the question of the respectability of the establishment; if this element was deficient she would perceive it as soon as he, and very likely it would be a part of the general initiation she had given him an impression of that she shouldn't mind it so long as the tea was strong and the bread and butter thick. She described to him what had passed between Miss Pynsent and herself (she didn't call her Pinnie, and he was glad, for he wouldn't have liked it) before he came in, and let him know that she should never dare to come to the place again, as his mother would tear her eyes out. Then she checked herself. "Of course she ain't your mother! How stupid I am! I keep forgetting."

Hyacinth had long since convinced himself that he had acquired a manner with which he could meet allusions of this kind: he had had, first and last, so many opportunities to practice it. Therefore he looked at his companion very steadily while he said, "My mother died many years ago; she was a great invalid. But Pinnie has been awfully good to me."

"My mother's dead, too," Miss Kenning remarked. "She died very suddenly. I dare say you remember her in the Place." Then, while Hyacinth disengaged from the past the wavering figure of Mrs. Henning, of whom he mainly remembered that she used to strike him as dirty, the girl added, smiling, but with more sentiment, "But I have had no Pinnie."

"You look as if you could take care of yourself."

"Well, I'm very confiding," said Millicent Henning. Then she asked what had become of Mr. Vetch. "We used to say that if Miss Pynsent was your mamma, he was your papa. In our family we used to call him Miss Pynsent's young man."

"He's her young man still," Hyacinth said. "He's our best friend — or supposed to be. He got me the place I'm in now. He lives by his fiddle, as he used to do."

Millicent looked a little at her companion, after which she remarked, "I should have thought he would have got you a place at his theatre."

"At his theatre? That would have been no use. I don't -play any instrument."

"I don't mean in the orchestra, you guby! You would look very nice in a fancy costume." She had her elbows on the table, and her shoulders lifted in an attitude of extreme familiarity. He was on the point of replying that he didn't care for fancy costumes, he wished to go through life in his own character; but he checked himself, with the reflection that this was exactly what, apparently, he was destined not to do. His own character? He was to cover that up as carefully as possible; he was to go through life in a mask, in a borrowed mantle; he was to be, every day and every hour, an actor. Suddenly, with the utmost irrelevance, Miss Henning inquired, "Is Miss Pynsent some relation? What gave her any right over you?"

Hyacinth had an answer ready for this question; he had determined to say, as he had several times said before, “Miss Pynsent is an old friend of my family. My mother was very fond of her, and she was very fond of my mother.” He repeated the formula now, looking at Millicent with the same inscrutable calmness (as he fancied), though what he would have liked to say to her would have been that his mother was none of her business. But she was too handsome to talk that way to, and she presented her large fair face to him, across the table, with an air of solicitation to be cosy and comfortable. There were things in his heart and a torment and a hidden passion in his life which he should be glad enough to lay open to some woman. He believed that perhaps this would be the cure, ultimately; that in return for something he might drop, syllable by syllable, into a listening feminine ear, certain other words would be spoken to him which would make his pain forever less sharp. But what woman could he trust, what ear would be safe? The answer was not in this loud, fresh, laughing creature, whose sympathy couldn’t have the fineness he was looking for, since her curiosity was vulgar. Hyacinth objected to the vulgar as much as Miss Pynsent herself; in this respect she had long since discovered that he was after her own heart. He had not taken up the subject of Mrs. Henning’s death; he felt himself incapable of inquiring about that lady, and had no desire for knowledge of Millicent’s relationships. Moreover, he always suffered, to sickness, when people began to hover about the question of his origin, the reasons why Pinnie had had the care of him from a baby. Mrs. Henning had been untidy, but at least her daughter could speak of her. “Mr. Vetch has changed his lodgings: he moved out of No. 17, three years ago,” he said, to vary the topic. “He couldn’t stand the other people in the house; there was a man that played the accordion.”

Millicent, however, was but moderately interested in this anecdote, and she wanted to know why people should like Mr. Vetch’s fiddle any better. Then she added, “And I think that, while he was about it, he might have put you into something better than a bookbinder’s.”

“He wasn’t obliged to put me into anything. It’s a very good place.”

“All the same, it isn’t where I should have looked to find you,” Millicent declared, not so much in the tone of wishing to pay him a compliment as of resentment at having miscalculated.

“Where should you have looked to find me? In the House of Commons? It’s a pity you couldn’t have told me, in advance, what you would have liked me to be.”

She looked at him, over her cup, while she drank, in several sips. “Do you know what they used to say in the Place? That your father was a lord.”

“Very likely. That’s the kind of rot they talk in that precious hole,” the young man said, without blenching.

“Well, perhaps he was,” Millicent ventured.

“He may have been a prince, for all the good it has done me.”

“Fancy your talking as if you didn’t know!” said Millicent.

“Finish your tea — don’t mind how I talk.”

“ Well, you ‘ave got a temper!” the girl exclaimed, archly. “1 should have thought you ‘d be a clerk at a banker’s.”

“Do they select them for their tempers?”

“You know what I mean. You used to be too clever to follow a trade.”

“Well, I’m not clever enough to live on air.”

“You might be, really, for all the tea you drink! Why didn’t you go in for some high profession?”

“How was I to go in? Who the devil was to help me?” Hyacinth inquired, with a certain vibration.

“Haven’t you got any relations?” said Millicent, after a moment.

“What are you doing? Are you trying to make me brag?”

When he spoke sharply she only laughed, not in the least ruffled, and by the way she looked at him seemed to like it. “Well, I’m sorry you ‘re only a journeyman,” she went on, pushing away her cup.

“So am I,” Hyacinth rejoined; but he called for the bill as if he had been an employer of labor. Then, while it was being brought, he remarked to his companion that he didn’t believe she had an idea of what his work was and how charming it could be. “Yes, I get up books for the shops,” he said, when she had retorted that she perfectly understood. “But the art of the binder is an exquisite art.”

“So Miss Pynsent told me. She said you had some samples at home. I should like to see them.”

“You wouldn’t know how good they are,” said Hyacinth, smiling.

He expected that she would exclaim, in answer, that he was an impudent wretch, and for a moment she seemed to be on the point of doing so. But the words changed, on her lips, and she replied, almost tenderly, “That’s just the way you used to speak to me, years ago, in the Place.”

“I don’t care about that. I hate all that time.”

“Oh, so do I, if you come to that,” said Millicent, as if she could rise to any breadth of view. And then she returned to her idea that he had not done himself justice. “You used always to be reading: I never thought you would work with your ‘ands.”

This seemed to irritate him, and, having paid the bill and given threepence, ostentatiously, to the young woman with a languid manner and hair of an unnatural yellow, who had waited on them, he said, “You may depend upon it, I sha’n’t do it an hour longer than I can help.”

“What will you do then?”

“Oh, you’ll see, some day.” In the street, after they had begun to walk again, he went on: “You speak as if I

could have my pick. What was an obscure little beggar to do, buried in a squalid corner of London, under a million of idiots? I had no help, no influence, no acquaintance of any kind with professional people, and no means of getting at them. I had to do something; I couldn't go on living on Pinnie. Thank God, I help her now, a little. I took what I could get." He spoke as if he had been touched by the imputation of having derogated.

Millicent seemed to imply that he defended himself successfully when she said, "You express yourself like a gentleman" — a speech to which he made no response. But he began to talk again afterwards, and, the evening having definitely set in, his companion took his arm for the rest of the way home. By the time he reached her door he had confided to her that, in secret, he wrote: he had a dream of literary distinction. This appeared to impress her, and she branched off to remark, with an irrelevance that characterized her, that she didn't care anything about a man's family if she liked the man himself; she thought families were all rot. Hyacinth wished she would leave his alone; and while they lingered in front of her house, before she went in, he said —

"I have no doubt you 're a jolly girl, and I am very happy to have seen you again. But you have awfully little tact."

"I have little tact? You should see me work off an old jacket!"

He was silent a moment, standing before her with his hands in his pockets. "It's a good job you 're so handsome."

Millicent didn't blush at this compliment, and probably didn't understand all it conveyed, but she looked into his eyes a while, with a smile that showed her teeth, and then said, more inconsequently than ever, "Come now, who are you?"

"Who am I? I'm a wretched little bookbinder."

"I didn't think I ever could fancy any one in that line!" Miss Henning exclaimed. Then she let him know that she couldn't ask him in, as she made it a point not to receive gentlemen, but she didn't mind if she took another walk with him, and she didn't care if she met him somewhere — if it were handy. As she lived so far from Lomax Place, she didn't care if she met him halfway. So, in the dusky bystreet in Pimlico, before separating, they took a casual tryst; the most interesting, the young man felt, that had yet been — he could scarcely call it granted him.

Chapter VI

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ONE DAY, shortly after this, at the bindery, his friend Poupin was absent, and sent no explanation, as was customary in case of illness or domestic accident. There were two or three men employed in the place whose nonappearance, usually following close upon pay-day, was better unexplained, and was an implication of moral feebleness; but as a general thing Mr. Crookenden's establishment was a haunt of punctuality and sobriety. Least of all had Eustache Poupin been in the habit of asking for a margin. Hyacinth knew how little indulgence he had ever craved, and this was part of his admiration for the extraordinary Frenchman, au ardent stoic, a cold conspirator, and an exquisite artist, who was by far the most interesting person in the ranks of his acquaintance, and whose conversation, in the workshop, helped him sometimes to forget the smell of leather and glue. His conversation! Hyacinth had had plenty of that, and had endeared himself to the passionate refugee — Poupin had come to England, early in life, as a victim of the wide proscriptions by which the Second French Empire was ushered in — by the solemnity and candor of his attention. He was a republican of the note of 1848, humanitary and idealistic, infinitely addicted to fraternity and equality, and inexhaustibly surprised and exasperated at finding so little enthusiasm for them in the land of his exile. Poupin had a high claim upon Hyacinth's esteem and gratitude, for he had been his godfather, his protector, at the bindery. When Theophilus Vetch found something for Miss Pynsent's protege to do, it was through the Frenchman, with whom he had accidentally formed an acquaintance, that he found it.

When the boy was about fifteen years of age Mr. Vetch made him a present of the essays of Lord Bacon, and the purchase of this volume had important consequences for Hyacinth. Theophilus Vetch was a poor man, and the luxury of giving was for the most part denied him; but when, once in a way, he tasted it, he liked the sensation to be pure. No man knew better the difference between the common and the rare, or was more capable of appreciating a book which opened well — of which the margin was not hideously sliced, and of which the lettering on the back was sharp. It was only such a book that he could bring himself to offer even to a poor little devil whom a fifth-rate dressmaker (he knew Pinnie was fifth rate) had rescued from the workhouse. So when it was a question of fitting the pages of the great Elizabethan with a new coat, a coat of full morocco, discreetly, delicately gilt, he went with his little cloth-bound volume, a Pickering, straight to Mr. Crookenden, whom every one that knew anything about the matter knew to be a prince of binders, though they also knew that his work, limited in quantity, was mainly done for a particular bookseller and only through the latter's agency. Theophilus Vetch had no idea of paying the bookseller's commission, and though he could be lavish (for him) when he made a present, he was capable of taking an immense deal of trouble to save sixpence. He made his way into Mr. Crookenden's workshop, which was situated in a small, superannuated square in Soho, and where the proposal of so slender a job was received at first with coldness.

Mr. Vetch, however, insisted, and explained with irresistible frankness the motive of his errand: the desire to obtain the best possible binding for the least possible money. He made his conception of the best possible binding so vivid, so exemplary, that the master of the shop at last confessed to that disinterested sympathy which, under favoring circumstances, establishes itself between the artist and the connoisseur. Mr. Vetch's little book was put in hand as a particular favor to an eccentric gentleman, whose visit had been a smile-stirring interlude (for the circle of listening workmen) in a merely mechanical day; and when he went back, three weeks later, to see whether it were done, he had the pleasure of finding that his injunctions, punctually complied with, had even been bettered. The work had been accomplished with a perfection of skill which made him ask whom he was to thank for it (he had been told that one man should do the whole of it), and in this manner he made the acquaintance of the most brilliant craftsman in the establishment, the incorruptible, the imaginative, the unerring Eustache Poupin.

In response to an appreciation which he felt not to be banal, M. Poupin remarked that he had at home a small collection of experiments in morocco, Russia, parchment, of fanciful specimens, with which, for the love of the art, he had amused his leisure hours, and which he should be happy to show his interlocutor, if the latter would do him the honor to call upon him at his lodgings in Lisson Grove. Mr. Vetch made a note of the address, and, for the love of the art, went one Sunday afternoon to see the binder's esoteric studies. On this occasion he made the acquaintance of Madame Poupin, a small, fat lady with a bristling mustache, the white cap of an ouvriere, a knowledge of her husband's craft that was equal to his own, and not a syllable of English save the words, "What you think, what you think?" which she introduced with startling frequency. He also discovered that his new acquaintance was a political proscript, and that he regarded the iniquitous fabric of church and state with an eye scarcely less reverent than the fiddler's own. M. Poupin was a socialist, which Theophilus Vetch was not, and a constructive democrat (instead of being a mere scoffer at effete things), and a theorist, and an optimist, and a visionary; he believed that the day was to come when all the nations of the earth would abolish their frontiers and armies and custom-houses, and embrace on both cheeks, and cover the globe with boulevards, radiating from Paris, where the human family would sit, in groups, at little tables, according to affinities, drinking coffee (not tea, par exemple I) and listening to the music of the spheres. Mr. Vetch neither prefigured nor desired this organized felicity: he was fond of his cup of tea, and only wanted to see the British constitution a good deal simplified; he thought it a much overrated system. But his heresies rubbed shoulders, sociably, with those of the little bookbinder, and his friend in Lisson Grove became for him the type of the intelligent foreigner whose conversation completes our culture. Poupin's humanitary zeal was as unlimited as his English vocabulary was the reverse, and the new friends agreed with each other enough, and not too much, to discuss, which was much better than an unspeakable harmony. On several other Sunday afternoons the fiddler went back to Lisson Grove, and having, at his theatre, as a veteran, a faithful servant, an occasional privilege, he was able to carry thither, one day in the autumn, an order for two seats in the second balcony. Madame Poupin and her husband passed a lugubrious evening at the English comedy, where they didn't understand a word that was spoken, and consoled themselves by gazing at their friend in the orchestra. But this adventure did not arrest the development of a friendship into which, eventually, Amanda Pynsent was drawn. Madame Poupin, among the cold insularies, lacked female society, and Mr. Vetch proposed to his amiable friend in Lomax Place to call upon her. The little dressmaker, who in the course of her life had known no Frenchwoman but the unhappy Florentine (so favorable a specimen till she began to go wrong), adopted his suggestion, in the hope that she should get a few ideas from a lady whose appearance would doubtless exemplify (as Florentine's originally had done) the fine taste of her nation; but she found the bookbinder and his wife a bewildering mixture of the brilliant and the undressed, and was haunted, long afterwards, by the memory of the lady's calico jacket, her uncorseted form, and her carpet slippers.

The acquaintance, none the less, was sealed three months later by a supper, one Sunday night, in Lisson Grove, to which Mr. Vetch brought his fiddle, at which Amanda presented to her hosts her adoptive son, and which also revealed to her that Madame Poupin could dress a Michaelmas goose, if she couldn't dress a fat Frenchwoman. This lady confided to the fiddler that she thought Miss Pynsent exceedingly comme il faut — dans le genre anglais; and neither Amanda nor Hyacinth had ever passed an evening of such splendor. It took its place, in the boy's recollection, beside the visit, years before, to Mr. Vetch's theatre. He drank in the conversation which passed between that gentleman and M. Poupin. M. Poupin showed him his bindings, the most precious trophies of his skill, and it seemed to Hyacinth that on the spot he was initiated into a fascinating mystery. He handled the books for half an hour; Theophilus Vetch watched him, without giving any particular sign. When, therefore, presently, Miss Pynsent consulted her friend, for the twentieth time, on the subject of Hyacinth's "career" — she spoke as if she were hesitating between the diplomatic service, the army, and the church — the fiddler replied with promptitude, "Make him, if you can, what the Frenchman is." At the mention of a handicraft poor Pinnie always looked very solemn, yet when Mr. Vetch asked her if she were prepared to send the boy to one of the universities, or to pay the premium required for his being: articled to a solicitor, or to make favor, on his behalf, with a bank-director or a mighty merchant, or, yet again, to provide him with a comfortable home while; he should woo the nause and await the laurels of literature — when, I say, he put the case before her with this cynical, ironical lucidity, she only sighed, and said that all the money she had ever saved was ninety pounds, which, as he knew perfectly well, it would cost her his acquaintance forevermore to take out of the bank. The fiddler had, in fact, declared to her, in a manner not to be mistaken,

that if she should divest herself, on the boy's account, of this sole nest-egg of her old age, he would wash his hands of her and her affairs. Her standard of success for Hyacinth was vague, save on one point, as regards which she was passionately, fiercely firm; she was perfectly determined he should never go into a small shop. She would rather see him a bricklayer or a costermonger than dedicated to a retail business, tying up candles at a grocer's, or giving change for a shilling across a counter. She would rather, she declared on one occasion, see him articled to a shoemaker or a tailor.

A stationer in a neighboring street had affixed to his window a written notice that he was in want of a smart errand boy, and Pinnie, on hearing of it, had presented Hyacinth to his consideration. The stationer was a dreadful bullying man, with a patch over his eye, who seemed to think the boy would be richly remunerated with fifteen pence a week; a contemptible measure, as it seemed to the dressmaker, of his rare abilities and acquirements. His schooling had been desultory, precarious, and had had a certain continuity mainly in his early years, while he was under the care of an old lady, who combined with the functions of pew-opener at a neighboring church the manipulation, in the Place itself, where she resided with her sister, a monthly nurse, of such pupils as could be spared (in their families) from the more urgent exercise of holding the baby and fetching the beer. Later, for a twelvemonth, Pinnie had paid five shillings a week for him at an "Academy" in Maida Vale, where there was an "instructor in the foreign languages," a platform for oratory, and a high social standard, but where Hyacinth suffered from the fact that almost all his mates were the sons of dealers in edible articles — pastrycooks, grocers, and fishmongers — and in this capacity subjected him to pangs and ignominious contrasts by bringing to school, for their exclusive consumption, or for exchange and barter, various buns, oranges, spices, and marine animals, which the boy, with his hands in his empty pockets, and the sense of a savorless home in his heart, was obliged to see devoured without his participation. Miss Pynsent would not have pretended that he was highly educated, in the technical sense of the word, but she believed that at fifteen he had read almost every book in the world. The limits of his reading were, in fact, only the limits of his opportunity. Mr. Vetch, who talked with him more and more as he grew older, knew that, and lent him every volume he possessed or could pick up for the purpose. Reading was his happiness, and the absence of any direct contact with a library his principal source of discontent, that is, of that part of his discontent which he could speak out. Mr. Vetch knew that he was really clever, and therefore thought it a woeful pity that he couldn't have furtherance in some liberal walk; but he would have thought it a greater pity still that so bright a lad should be condemned to measure tape or cut slices of cheese. He himself had no influence which he could bring into play, no connection with the great world of capital or the market of labor. That is, he touched these mighty institutions at but one very small point — a point which, such as it was, he kept well in mind.

When Pinnie replied to the stationer round the corner, after he had mentioned the "terms" on which he was prepared to receive applications from errand-boys, that, thank Heaven, she hadn't sunk so low as that — so low as to sell her darling into slavery for fifteen pence a week — he felt that she only gave more florid expression to his own sentiment. Of course, if Hyacinth did not begin by carrying parcels, he could not hope to be promoted, through the more refined nimbleness of tying them up, to a position as accountant or bookkeeper; but both the fiddler and his friend — Miss Pynsent, indeed, only in the last resort — resigned themselves to the forfeiture of this prospect. Mr. Vetch saw clearly that a charming handicraft was a finer thing than a vulgar "business," and one day, after his acquaintance with Eustache Poupin had gone a considerable length, he inquired of the Frenchman whether there would be a chance of the lad's obtaining a footing, under his own wing, in Mr. Crookenden's workshop. There could be no better place for him to acquire a knowledge of the most delightful of the mechanical arts; and to be received into such an establishment, and at the instance of such an artist, would be a real start in life. M. Poupin meditated, and that evening confided his meditations to the companion who reduplicated all his thoughts, and understood him better even than he understood himself. The pair had no children, and had felt the defect; moreover, they had heard from Mr. Vetch the dolorous tale of the boy's entrance into life. He was one of the disinherited, one of the expropriated, one of the exceptionally interesting; and, moreover, he was one of themselves, a child, as it were, of France, an offshoot of the sacred race. It is not the most authenticated point in this veracious history, but there is strong reason to believe that tears were shed' that night, in Lisson Grove, over poor little Hyacinth Robinson. In a day or two M. Poupin replied to the fiddler that he had now been for years in Mr. Crookenden's employ; that during that time he had done work for him that he would have had bien du mal to get done by another, and had never asked for an indulgence, an allowance, a remission, an augmentation. It was time, if only for the dignity of the thing, he should ask for something, and he would make their little friend the subject of his demand. "La societe lui doit bien cela," he remarked afterwards, when, Mr. Crookenden proving dryly hospitable, and the arrangement being formally complete, Mr. Vetch thanked him, in his kindly, casual, bashful English way. He was paternal when Hyacinth began to occupy a place in the malodorous chambers in Soho; he took him in hand, made him a disciple, the recipient of a precious tradition, discovered in him a susceptibility to philosophic as well as technic truth. He taught him French and socialism, encouraged him to spend his evenings in Lisson Grove, invited him to regard Madame Poupin as a second, or rather as a third, mother, and in short made a very considerable mark on the boy's mind. He elicited the latent Gallicism of his nature, and by the time he was twenty, Hyacinth, who had completely assimilated his influence, regarded him with a mixture of veneration and amusement. M. Poupin was the person who consoled him most when he was

miserable; and he was very often miserable.

His staying away from his work was so rare that, in the afternoon, before he went home, Hyacinth walked to Lisson Grove to see what ailed him. He found his friend in bed, with a plaster on his chest, and Madame Poupin making tisane over the fire. The Frenchman took his indisposition solemnly but resignedly, like a man who believed that all illness was owing to the imperfect organization of society, and lay covered up to his chin, with a red cotton handkerchief bound round his head. Near his bed sat a visitor, a young man unknown to Hyacinth. Hyacinth, naturally, had never been to Paris, but he always supposed that the interieur of his friend's in Lisson Grove gave rather a vivid idea of that city. The two small rooms which constituted their establishment contained a great many mirrors, as well as little portraits (old-fashioned prints) of revolutionary heroes. The chimneypiece, in the bedroom, was muffled in some red drapery, which appeared to Hyacinth extraordinarily magnificent; the principal ornament of the salon was a group of small and highly decorated cups, on a tray, accompanied by gilt bottles and glasses, the latter still more diminutive — the whole intended for black coffee and liqueurs. There was no carpet on the floor, but rugs and mats, of various shapes and sizes, disposed themselves at the feet of the chairs and sofas; and in the sitting-room, where there was a wonderful gilt clock, of the Empire, surmounted with a "subject" representing Virtue receiving a crown of laurel from the hands of Faith, Madame Poupin, with the aid of a tiny stove, a handful of charcoal, and two or three saucepans, carried on a triumphant cuisine. In the windows were curtains of white muslin, much fluted and frilled, and tied with pink ribbon.

Chapter VII

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"I AM SUFFERING extremely, but we must all suffer, so long as the social question is so abominably, so iniquitously neglected," Poupin remarked, speaking French, and rolling toward Hyacinth his salient, excited-looking eyes, which always had the same proclaiming, challenging expression, whatever his occupation or his topic. Hyacinth had seated himself near his friend's pillow, opposite the strange young man, who had been accommodated with a chair at the foot of the bed.

"Ah, yes; with their filthy politics, the situation of the pauvre monde is the last thing they ever think of!" his wife exclaimed, from the fire. "There are times when I ask myself how long it will go on."

"It will go on till the measure of their imbecility, their infamy, is full. It will go on till the day of justice, till the reintegration of the despoiled and disinherited, is ushered in with an irresistible force."

"Oh, we always see things go on; we never see them change," said Madame Poupin, making a very cheerful clatter with a big spoon in a saucepan.

"We may not see it, but they'll see it," her husband rejoined. "But what do I say, my children? I do see it," he pursued. "It's before my eyes, in its luminous reality, especially as I lie here — the revendication, the rehabilitation, the rectification."

Hyacinth ceased to pay attention, not because he had a differing opinion about what M. Poupin called the avenement of the disinherited, but, on the contrary, precisely on account of his familiarity with that prospect. It was the constant theme of his French friends, whom he had long since perceived to be in a state of chronic spiritual inflammation. For them the social question was always in order, the political question always abhorrent, the disinherited always present. He wondered at their zeal, their continuity, their vivacity, their incorruptibility; at the abundant supply of conviction and prophecy which they always had on hand. He believed that at bottom he was sorer than they, yet he had deviations and lapses, moments when the social question bored him, and he forgot not only his own wrongs, which would have been pardonable, but those of the people at large, of his brothers and sisters in misery. They, however, were perpetually in the breach, and perpetually consistent with themselves, and, what is more, with each other. Hyacinth had heard that the institution of marriage in France was rather lightly considered, but he was struck with the closeness and intimacy of the union in Lisson Grove, the passionate identity of interest: especially on the day when M. Poupin informed him, in a moment of extreme but not indiscreet expansion, that the lady was his wife only in a spiritual, transcendental sense. There were hypocritical concessions and debasing superstitions of which this exalted pair wholly disapproved. Hyacinth knew their vocabulary by heart, and could have said everything, in the same words, that on any given occasion M. Poupin was likely to say. He knew that "they," in their phraseology, was a comprehensive allusion to every one in the world but the people — though who, exactly, in their length and breadth, the people were was less definitely established. He himself was of this sacred body, for which the future was to have such compensations; and so, of course, were the Frenchman and his consort, and so was Pinnie, and so were most of the inhabitants of Lomax Place and the workmen in old Crookenden's shop. But was old Crookenden himself, who wore an apron rather dirtier than the rest of them and was a master-hand at "forwarding," but who, on the other side, was the occupant of a detached villa in Kentish Town, with a wife known to have secret aspirations toward a page in buttons? Above all, was Mr. Vetch, who earned a weekly wage, and not a large one, with his fiddle, but who had mysterious affinities of another sort, reminiscences of a phase in which he smoked cigars, had a hat-box, and used cabs, besides visiting Boulogne?

Theophilus Vetch had interfered in his life, atrociously, in a terrible crisis; but Hyacinth, who strove to cultivate justice in his own conduct, believed he had acted conscientiously and tried to esteem him, the more so as the fiddler evidently felt that he had something to make up to him, and had treated him with marked benevolence for years. He believed, in short, that Mr. Vetch took a sincere interest in him, and if he should meddle again would meddle in a different way: he used to see him sometimes looking at him with the kindest eyes. It would make a difference, therefore, whether he were of the people or not, inasmuch as in the day of the great revenge it would only be the people who should be saved. It was for the people the world was made: whoever was not of them was against them; and all others were cumberers, usurpers, exploiters, accapareurs, as M. Poupin used to say. Hyacinth had once put the question directly to Mr. Vetch, who looked at him a while through the fumes of his eternal pipe, and then said, "Do you think I'm an aristocrat?"

"I didn't know but you were a bourgeois," the young man answered.

"No, I'm neither. I'm a Bohemian."

"With your evening dress, every night?"

"My dear boy," said the fiddler, "those are the most confirmed."

Hyacinth was only half satisfied with this, for it was by no means definite to him that Bohemians were also to be saved; if he could be sure, perhaps he would become one himself. Yet he never suspected Mr. Vetch of being a "spy" though Eustache Poupin had told him that there were a great many who looked a good deal like that: not, of course, with any purpose of incriminating the fiddler, whom he had trusted from the first and continued to trust. The middle-class spy became a very familiar type to Hyacinth, and though he had never caught one of the infamous brotherhood in the act, there were plenty of persons to whom, on the very face of the matter, he had no hesitation in attributing the character. There was nothing of the Bohemian, at any rate, about the Poupins, whom Hyacinth had now known long enough not to be surprised at the way they combined the socialistic passion, a red-hot impatience for the genera] ratification, with an extraordinary decency of life and a worship of proper work. The Frenchman spoke, habitually, as if the great swindle practiced upon the people were too impudent to be endured a moment longer, and yet he found patience for the most exquisite "tooling," and took a book in hand with the deliberation of one who should believe that everything was immutably constituted. Hyacinth knew what he thought of priests and theologies, but he had the religion of conscientious craftsmanship, and he reduced the boy, on his side, to a kind of prostration before his delicate, wonderworking fingers. "What will you have? J'ai la main parisienne," M. Poupin would reply modestly, when Hyacinth's admiration broke out; and he was good enough, after he had seen a few specimens of what our hero could do, to inform him that he had the same happy conformation. "There is no reason why you shouldn't be a good workman, il ri a que fait" and his own life was practically governed by this conviction. He delighted in the use of his hands and his tools, arid the exercise of his taste, which was faultless, and Hyacinth could easily imagine how it must torment him to spend a day on his back. He ended by perceiving, however, that consolation was, on this occasion, in some degree conveyed by the presence of the young man who sat at the foot of the bed, and with whom M. Poupin exhibited such signs of acquaintance as to make our hero wonder why he had not seen him before, nor even heard of him.

"What do you mean by an irresistible force?" the young man inquired, leaning back in his chair, with raised arms and his interlocked hands behind him, supporting his head. M. Poupin had spoken French, which he always preferred to do, the insular tongue being au immense tribulation to him; but his visitor spoke English, and Hyacinth immediately perceived that there was nothing French about him — M. Poupin could never tell him he had la main parisienne.

"I mean a force that will make the bourgeois go down into their cellars and hide, pale with fear, behind their barrels of wine and their heaps of gold!" cried M. Poupin, rolling terrible eyes.

"And in this country, I hope, in their coal-bins. La, la, we shall find them even there," his wife remarked.

"'89 was an irresistible force," said M. Poupin. "I believe you would have thought so if you had been there."

"And so was the coup d'etat, which sent you over here, seventeen years ago," the young man rejoined. He saw that Hyacinth was watching him, and he met his eyes, smiling a little, in a way that added to our hero's interest.

"Pardon, pardon, I resist!" cried Eustache Poupin, glaring, in his improvised nightcap, out of his sheets; and Madame repeated that they resisted — she believed well that they resisted! The young man burst out laughing; whereupon his host declared, with a dignity which even his recumbent position did not abate, that it was really frivolous of him to ask such questions as that, knowing as he did — what he did know.

"Yes, I know — I know," said the young man. goodnaturedly, lowering his arms and thrusting his hands into his pockets, while he stretched his long legs a little. "But everything is yet to be tried."

"Oh, the trial will be on a great scale — soyez tranquille! It will be one of those experiments that constitute a proof."

Hyacinth wondered what they were talking about, and perceived that it must be something important, for the stranger was not a man who would take an interest in anything else. Hyacinth was immensely struck with him — he could see that he was remarkable — and felt slightly aggrieved that he should be a stranger; that is, that he should be, apparently, a familiar of Lisson Grove, and yet that M. Poupin should not have thought his young friend from Lomax Place worthy, up to this time, to be made acquainted with him. I know not to what degree the visitor in the other chair discovered these reflections in Hyacinth's face, but after a moment,

looking across at him, he said in a friendly yet just slightly diffident way, a way our hero liked, “And do you know, too?”

“Do I know what?” asked Hyacinth, wondering.

“Oh, if you did, you would!” the young man exclaimed, laughing again. Such a rejoinder, from any one else, would have irritated our sensitive hero, but it only made Hyacinth more curious about his interlocutor, whose laugh was loud and extraordinarily gay.

“Man ami, you ought to present ces messieurs,” Madame Poupin remarked.

“Ah pa, is that the way you trifle with state secrets?” her husband cried out, without heeding her. Then he went on, in a different tone: “M. Hyacinthe is a gifted child, un enfant tres-doue, in whom I take a tender interest — a child who has an account to settle. Oh, a thumping big one! Isn’t it so, mon petit?”

This was very well meant, but it made Hyacinth blush, and, without knowing exactly what to say, he murmured, shyly, “Oh, I only want them to let me alone!”

“He is very young,” said Eustache Poupin.

“He is the person we have seen in this country whom we like the best,” his wife added.

“Perhaps you are French,” suggested the strange young man.

The trio seemed to Hyacinth to be waiting for his answer to this; it was as if a listening stillness had fallen upon them. He found it a difficult moment, partly because there was something exciting and embarrassing in the attention of the other visitor, and partly because he had never yet had to decide that important question. He didn’t really know whether he were French or English, or which of the two he should prefer to be. His mother’s blood, her suffering in an alien land, the unspeakable, impenetrable misery that consumed her, in a place, among a people, she must have execrated — all this made him French; yet he was conscious at the same time of qualities that didn’t mix with it. He had evolved, long ago, a legend about his mother, built it up slowly, adding piece to piece, in passionate musings and broodings, when his cheeks burned and his eyes filled; but there were times when it wavered and faded, when it ceased to console him and he ceased to trust it. He had had a father, too, and his father had suffered as well, and had fallen under a blow, and had paid with his life; and him also he felt in his mind and his body, when the effort to think it out did not simply end in darkness and confusion, challenging still even while they baffled, and inevitable freezing horror. At any rate, he seemed rooted in the place where his wretched parents had expiated, and he knew nothing about any other. Moreover, when old Poupin said, “M. Hyacinthe,” as he had often done before, he didn’t altogether enjoy it; he thought it made his name, which he liked well enough in English, sound like the name of a hairdresser. Our young friend was overclouded and stigmatized, but he was not yet prepared to admit that he was ridiculous. “Oh, I dare say I ain’t anything,” he replied in a moment.

“En v’la des betises!” cried Madame Poupin. “Do you mean to say you are not as good as any one in the world? I should like to see!”

“We all have an account to settle, don’t you know?” said the strange young man.

He evidently meant this to be encouraging to Hyacinth, whose quick desire to avert M. Poupin’s allusions had not been lost upon him; but our hero could see that he himself would be sure to be one of the first to be paid. He would make society bankrupt, but he would be paid. He was tall and fair and goodnatured looking, but you couldn’t tell — or at least Hyacinth couldn’t — whether he were handsome or ugly, with his large head and square forehead, his thick, straight hair, his heavy mouth and rather vulgar nose, his admirably clear, bright eye, light-colored and set very deep; for though there was a want of fineness in some of its parts, his face had a marked expression of intelligence and resolution, and denoted a kind of joyous moral health. He was dressed like a workman in his Sunday toggery, having evidently put on his best to call in Lisson Grove, where he was to meet a lady, and wearing in particular a necktie which was both cheap and pretentious, and of which Hyacinth, who noticed everything of that kind, observed the crude, false blue. He had very big shoes — the shoes, almost, of a country laborer — and spoke with a provincial accent, which Hyacinth believed to be that of Lancashire. This didn’t suggest cleverness, but it didn’t prevent Hyacinth from perceiving that he was the reverse of stupid; that he probably, indeed, had a tremendous head. Our little hero had a great desire to know clever people, and he interested himself on the spot in this strong, humorous fellow, who had the complexion of a ploughboy and the glance of a commander-in-chief, and who might have been (Hyacinth thought) a distinguished young savant in the disguise of an artisan. The disguise would have been very complete, for he had several brown stains on his fingers. Hyacinth’s curiosity, on this occasion, was both excited and gratified; for after two or three allusions, which he didn’t understand, had been made to a certain place where Poupin and the stranger had met and expected to meet again, Madame Poupin exclaimed that it was a shame not to take in M. Hyacinthe, who, she would answer for it, had in him the making of one of the pure. “All in good time, in good time, ma bonne” the invalid replied. “M. Hyacinthe knows that I count upon him, whether or no I make him an interne to-day, or wait a while longer.”

“What do you mean by an interne?” Hyacinth asked.

“Mon Dieu, what shall I say?” and Eustache Poupin stared at him solemnly, from his pillow. “You are very sympathetic, but I am afraid you are too young.”

“One is never too young to contribute one’s obole,” said Madame Poupiu.

“Can you keep a secret?” asked the other visitor, smilingly.

“Is it a plot — a conspiracy?” Hyacinth broke out.

“He asks that as if he were asking if it’s a plum-pudding,” said M. Poupin. “It isn’t good to eat, and we don’t do it for our amusement. It’s terribly serious, my child.”

“It’s a kind of society, to which he and I and a good many others belong. There is no harm in telling him that,” the young man went on.

“I advise you not to tell it to Mademoiselle; she is quite in the old ideas,” Madame Poupin suggested to Hyacinth, tasting her tisane.

Hyacinth sat baffled and wondering, looking from his fellow-laborer in Soho to his new acquaintance opposite. “If you have some plan, something to which one can give one’s self, I think you might have told me,” he remarked, in a moment, to Poupin.

The latter merely gazed at him a while; then he said to the strange young man, “He is a little jealous of you. But there is no harm in that; it’s of his age. You must know him, you must like him. We will tell you his history some other day; it will make you feel that he belongs to us, in fact. It is an accident that he hasn’t met you here before.”

“How could ces messieurs have met, when M. Paul never comes? He doesn’t spoil us!” Madame Poupin cried.

“Well, you see I have my little sister at home to take care of, when I ain’t at the shop,” M. Paul explained. “This afternoon it was just a chance; there was a lady we know came in to sit with her.”

“A lady — a real lady?”

“Oh, yes, every inch,” said M. Paul, laughing.

“Do you like them to thrust themselves into your apartment like that, because you have the desagrement of being poor? It seems to be the custom in this country, but it wouldn’t suit me at all,” Madame Poupin continued. “I should like to see one of ces dames — the real ones — coming in to sit with me!”

“Oh, you are not a cripple; you have got the use of your legs!”

“Yes, and of my arms!” cried the Frenchwoman.

“This lady looks after several others in our court, and she reads to my sister.”

“Oh, well, you are patient, you English.”

“We shall never do anything without that,” said M. Paul, with undisturbed good-humor.

“You are perfectly right; you can’t say that too often. It will be a tremendous job, and only the strong will prevail,” his host murmured, a little wearily, turning his eyes to Madame Poupin, who approached slowly, holding the tisane in a rather full bowl, and tasting it again and yet again as she came.

Hyacinth had been watching his fellow-visitor with deepening interest; a fact of which M. Paul apparently became aware, for he said, presently, giving a little nod in the direction of the bed, “He says we ought to know each other. I’m sure I have nothing against it. I like to know folk, when they ‘re worth it!”

Hyacinth was too pleased with this even to take it up; it seemed to him, for a moment, that he couldn’t touch it gracefully enough. But he said, with sufficient eagerness, “Will you tell me all about your plot?”

“Oh, it’s no plot. I don’t think I care much for plots.” And with his mild, steady, light-blue English eye, M. Paul certainly had not much the appearance of a conspirator.

“Isn’t it a new era?” asked Hyacinth, rather disappointed.

“Well, I don’t know; it’s just a little movement.”

“Ah bien, voila du propre; between us we have thrown him into a fever!” cried Madame Poupin, who had put down her bowl on a table near her husband’s bed and was bending over him, with her hand on his forehead. Eustache was flushed, he had closed his eyes, and it was evident there had been more than enough conversation. Madame Poupin announced as much, with the addition that if the young men wished to make acquaintance they must do it outside; the invalid must be perfectly quiet. They accordingly withdrew, with apologies and promises to return for further news on the morrow, and two minutes afterward Hyacinth found himself standing face to face with his new friend on the pavement in front of M. Poupin’s residence, under a street-lamp which struggled ineffectually with the brown winter dusk.

“Is that your name — M. Paul?” he asked, looking up at him.

“Oh, bless you, no; that’s only her Frenchified way of putting it. My name is Paul, though — Paul Muniment.”

“And what’s your trade?” Hyacinth demanded, with a jump into familiarity; for his companion seemed to have told him a great deal more than was usually conveyed in that item of information.

Paul Muniment looked down at him from above broad shoulders. “I work at a wholesale chemist’s, at Lambeth.”

“And where do you live?” “I live over the water, too; in the far south of London.”

“And are you going home now?” “Oh, yes, I am going to toddle.” “And may I toddle with you?” Mr. Muniment considered him further; then he gave a laugh. “I’ll carry you, if you like.”

“Thank you; I expect I can walk as far as you,” said Hyacinth.

“Well, I admire your spirit, and I dare say I shall like your company.”

There was something in his face, taken in connection with the idea that he was concerned in a little movement, which made Hyacinth feel the desire to go with him till he dropped; and in a moment they started away together, and took the direction Muniment had mentioned. They discoursed as they went, and exchanged

a great many opinions and anecdotes; but they reached the southeasterly court in which the young chemist lived with his infirm sister before he had told Hyacinth anything definite about his little movement, or Hyacinth, on his side, had related to him the circumstances connected with his being, according to M. Poupin, one of the disinherited. Hyacinth didn't wish to press him; he would not for the world have appeared to him indiscreet; and, moreover, though he had taken so great a fancy to Muniment, he was not quite prepared, as yet, to be pressed. Therefore it did not become very clear to him how his companion had made Poupin's acquaintance, and how long he had enjoyed it. Paul Muniment, nevertheless, was, to a certain extent, communicative about himself, and forewarned Hyacinth that he lived in a very poor little corner. He had his sister to keep — she could do nothing for herself; and he paid a low rent, because she had to have doctors, and doses, and all sorts of little comforts. He spent a shilling a week for her on flowers. It was better, too, when you got upstairs, and from the back windows you could see the dome of St. Paul's. Audley Court, with its pretty name, which reminded Hyacinth of Tennyson, proved to be a still dingier nook than Lomax Place; and it had the further drawback that you had to pass through a narrow alley, a passage between high, black walls, to enter it. At the door of one of the houses the young men paused, lingering a little, and then Muniment said, "I say, why shouldn't you come up? I like you well enough for that, and you can see my sister; her name is Posy." He spoke as if this would be a great privilege, and added, humorously, that Posy enjoyed a call from a gentleman, of all things. Hyacinth needed no urging, and he groped his way, at his companion's heels, up a dark staircase, which appeared to him — for they stopped only when they could go no further — the longest and steepest he had ever ascended. At the top Paul Muniment pushed open a door, but exclaimed, "Hullo, have you gone to roost?" on perceiving that the room on the threshold of which they stood was unlighted.

"Oh dear, no; we are sitting in the dark," a small, bright voice instantly replied. "Lady Aurora is so kind; she's here still."

The voice came out of a corner so pervaded by gloom that the speaker was indistinguishable. "Dear me, that's beautiful!" Paul Muniment rejoined. "You'll have a party, then, for I have brought some one else. We are poor, you know, but I dare say we can manage a candle."

At this, in the dim firelight, Hyacinth saw a tall figure erect itself — a figure angular and slim, crowned with a large, vague hat, surmounted, apparently, with a flowing veil. This unknown person gave a singular laugh, and said, "Oh, I brought some candles; we could have had a light if we had wished it." Both the tone and the purport of the words announced to Hyacinth that they proceeded from the lips of Lady Aurora.

Chapter VIII

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PAUL MUNIMENT took a match out of his pocket and lighted it on the sole of his shoe; after which he applied it to a tallow candle which stood in a tin receptacle on the low mantel - shelf. This enabled Hyacinth to perceive a narrow bed in a corner, and a small figure stretched upon it — a figure revealed to him mainly by the bright fixedness of a pair of large eyes, of which the whites were sharply contrasted with the dark pupil, and which gazed at him across a counterpane of gaudy patchwork. The brown room seemed crowded with heterogeneous objects, and had, moreover, for Hyacinth, thanks to a multitude of small prints, both plain and colored, fastened all over the walls, a highly decorated appearance. The little person in the corner had the air of having gone to bed in a picture-gallery, and as soon as Hyacinth became aware of this his impression deepened that Paul Muniment and his sister were very remarkable people. Lady Aurora hovered before him with a kind of drooping erectness, laughing a good deal, vaguely and shyly, as if there were something rather awkward in her being found still on the premises. “Rosy, girl, I’ve brought you a visitor,” Paul Muniment said. “This young man has walked all the way from Lisson Grove to make your acquaintance.” Rosy continued to look at Hyacinth from over her counterpane, and he felt slightly embarrassed, for he had never yet been presented to a young lady in her position. “You mustn’t mind her being in bed — she’s always in bed,” her brother went on. “She’s in bed just the same as a little trout is in the water.”

“Dear me, if I didn’t receive company because I was in bed, there wouldn’t be much use, would there, Lady Aurora?”

Rosy made this inquiry in a light, gay tone, darting her brilliant eyes at her companion, who replied, instantly, with still greater hilarity, and in a voice which struck Hyacinth as strange and affected, “Oh, dear, no, it seems quite the natural place!” Then she added, “And it’s such a pretty bed, such a comfortable bed!”

“Indeed it is, when your-ladyship makes it up,” said Rosy; while Hyacinth wondered at this strange phenomenon of a peer’s daughter (for he knew she must be that) performing the functions of a housemaid.

“I say, now, you haven’t been doing that again to-day?” Muniment asked, punching the mattress of the invalid with a vigorous hand.

“Pray, who would, if I didn’?” Lady Aurora inquired. “It only takes a minute, if one knows how.” Her manner was jocosely apologetic, and she seemed to plead guilty to having been absurd; in the dim light Hyacinth thought he saw her blush, as if she were much embarrassed. In spite of her blushing, her appearance and man-ner suggested to him a personage in a comedy. She sounded the letter r peculiarly.

“I can do it, beautifully. I often do it, when Mrs. Major doesn’ come up,” Paul Muniment said, continuing to thump his sister’s couch in an appreciative but somewhat subversive manner.

“Oh, I have no doubt whatever!” Lady Aurora exclaimed, quickly. “Mrs. Major must have so very much to do.”

“Not in the making-up of beds, I’m afraid; there are only two or three, down there, for so many,” Paul Muniment remarked, loudly, and with a kind of incongruous cheerfulness.

“Yes, I have thought a great deal about that. But there wouldn’ be room for more, you know,” said Lady Aurora, this time in a very serious tone. “There’s not much room for a family of that sort anywhere — thirteen people, of all ages and sizes,” the young man rejoined. “The world ‘s pretty big, but there doesn’ seem room.”

“We are also thirteen at home;” said Lady Aurora, laughing again. “We are also rather crowded.”

“Surely you don’ mean at Inglefield?” Rosy inquired, eagerly, in her dusky nook.

“I don’ know about Inglefield. I am so much in town.” Hyacinth could see that Inglefield was a subject she wished to turn off, and to do so she added, “We too are of all ages and sizes.

“Well, it ‘s fortunate you are not all your size!” Paul Muniment exclaimed, with a freedom at which Hyacinth was rather shocked, and which led him to suspect that, though his new friend was a very fine fellow, a delicate tact was not his main characteristic. Later, he explained this by the fact that he was rural and provincial, and had not had, like himself, the benefit of metropolitan culture; and later still, he asked himself what, after all, such a character as that had to do with tact or with compliments, and why its work in the world was not most properly performed by the simple exercise of a rude, manly strength.

At this familiar allusion to her stature Lady Aurora turned hither and thither, a little confusedly; Hyacinth saw her high, lean figure sway to and fro in the dim little room. Her commotion carried her to the door, and with ejaculations of which it was difficult to guess the meaning she was about to depart, when Rosy detained her, having evidently much more social art than Paul. “Don’ you see it’s only because her ladyship is standing up that she’s so, you gump? We are not thirteen, at any rate, and we have got all the furniture we want, so that there’s a chair for every one. Do be seated again, Lady Aurora, and help me to entertain this gentleman. I don’ know your name, sir; perhaps my brother will mention it when he has collected his wits. I am very glad to see you, though I don’ see you very well. Why shouldn’ we light one of her ladyship’s candles? It’s very different from that common thing.”

Hyacinth thought Miss Muniment very charming: he had begun to make her out better by this time, and he

watched her little wan, pointed face, framed, on the pillow, by thick black hair. She was a diminutive, dark person, pale and wasted with a lifelong infirmity. Hyacinth thought her manner denoted high cleverness; he judged it impossible to tell her age. Lady Aurora said she ought to have gone, long since; but she seated herself, nevertheless, on the chair that Paul pushed toward her.

"Here's a go!" this young man exclaimed. "You told me your name, but I've clean forgotten it." Then, when Paul had announced it again, he said to his sister, "That won't tell you much; there are bushels of Robinsons in the north. But you'll like him; he's a very smart little fellow; I met him at the Poupins'." "Puppin" would represent the sound by which he designated the French bookbinder, and that was the name by which Hyacinth always heard him called at Mr. Crookenden's. Hyacinth knew how much nearer to the right thing he himself came.

"Your name, like mine, represents a flower," said the little woman in the bed. "Mine is Eose Muniment, and her ladyship's is Aurora Langrish. That means the morning, or the dawn; it's the most beautiful of all, don't you think so?" Eose Muniment addressed this inquiry to Hyacinth, while Lady Aurora gazed at her shyly and mutely, as if she admired her manner, her self-possession and flow of conversation. Her brother lighted one of the visitor's candles, and the girl went on, without waiting for Hyacinth's response: "Isn't it right that she should be called the dawn, when she brings light where she goes? The Puppins are the charming foreigners I have told you about," she explained to her friend.

"Oh, it's so pleasant knowing a few foreigners!" Lady Aurora exclaimed, with a spasm of expression, "They are often so very fresh."

"Mr. Robinson's a sort of foreigner, and he's very fresh," said Paul Muniment. "He meets Mr. Puppin quite on his own ground. If I had his command of the lingo it would give me a lift."

"I'm sure I should be very happy to help you with your French. I feel the advantage of knowing it," Hyacinth, remarked, finely, and became conscious that his declaration drew the attention of Lady Aurora towards him; so that he wondered what he could go on to say, to keep at that level. This was the first time he had encountered, socially, a member of that aristocracy to which he had now for a good while known it was Miss Pynsent's theory that he belonged; and the occasion was interesting, in spite of the lady's appearing to have so few of the qualities of her caste. She was about thirty years of age; her nose was large, and, in spite of the sudden retreat of her chin, her face was long and lean. She had the manner of extreme nearsightedness; her front teeth projected from her upper gums, which she revealed when she smiled, and her fair hair in tangled, silky skeins (Eose Muniment thought it too lovely) drooped over her pink cheeks. Her clothes looked as if she had worn them a good deal in the rain, and the note of a certain disrepair in her apparel was given by a hole in one of her black gloves, through which a white finger gleamed. She was plain and diffident, and she might have been poor; but in the fine grain and sloping, shrinking slimness of her whole person, the delicacy of her curious features, and a kind of cultivated quality in her sweet, vague, civil expression there was a suggestion of race, of long transmission, of an organism highly evolved. She was not a common woman; she was one of the caprices of an aristocracy. Hyacinth did not define her in this manner to himself, but he received from her the impression that, though she was a simple creature (which he learned later she was not), aristocracies were complicated things. Lady Aurora remarked that there were many delightful books in French, and Hyacinth rejoined that it was a torment to know that (as he did, very well), when you didn't see your way to getting hold of them. This led Lady Aurora to say, after a moment's hesitation, that she had a good lot of her own, and that if he liked she should be most happy to lend them to him. Hyacinth thanked her — thanked her even too much, and felt both the kindness and the brilliant promise of the offer (he knew the exasperation of having volumes in his hands, for external treatment, which he couldn't take home at night, having tried that system, surreptitiously, during his first weeks at Mr. Crookenden's and come very near losing his place in consequence), while he wondered how it could be put into practice; whether she would expect him to call at her house and wait in the hall till the books were sent out to him. Eose Muniment exclaimed that that was her ladyship all over — always wanting to make up to people for being less fortunate than herself: she would take the shoes off her feet for any one that might take a fancy to them. At this the visitor declared that she would stop coming to see her, if the girl took her up, that way, for everything; and Rosy, without heeding this remonstrance, explained to Hyacinth that she thought it the least she could do to give what she had. She was so ashamed of being rich that she wondered the lower classes didn't break into Triglefield and take possession of all the treasures in the Italian room. She was a tremendous socialist; she was worse than any one — she was worse, even, than Paul.

"I wonder if she is worse than me," Hyacinth said, at a venture, not understanding the allusions to Inglefield and the Italian room, which Miss Muniment made as if she knew all about these places. After Hyacinth knew more of the world he remembered this tone of Muniment's sister (he was to have plenty of observation of it on other occasions) as that of a person who was in the habit of visiting the nobility at their countryseats; she talked about Inglefield as if she had stayed there.

"Hullo, I didn't know you were so advanced!" exclaimed Paul Muniment, who had been sitting silent, sidewise, in a chair that was too narrow for him, with his big arm hugging the back. "Have we been entertaining an angel unawares?"

Hyacinth seemed to see that he was laughing at him, but he knew the way to face that sort of thing was to exaggerate his meaning. "You didn't know I was advanced? Why, I thought that was the principal thing about

me. I think I go about as far as it is possible to go."

"I thought the principal thing about you was that you knew French," Paul Muniment said, with a laugh which showed Hyacinth that he wouldn't put that ridicule upon him unless he liked him, at the same time that it revealed to him that he himself had just been posturing a little.

"Well, I don't know it for nothing. I'll say something very sharp and clever to you, if you don't look out — just the sort of thing they say so much in French."

"Oh, do say something of that kind; we should enjoy it so much!" cried Rosy, in perfect good faith, clasping her hands in expectation.

The appeal was embarrassing, but Hyacinth was saved from the consequences of it by a remark from Lady Aurora, who quavered out the words after two or three false starts, appearing to address him, now that she spoke to him directly, with a sort of overdone consideration: "I should like so very much to know — it would be so interesting — if you don't mind — how far exactly you do go." She threw back her head very far, and thrust her shoulders forward, and if her chin had been more adapted to such a purpose would have appeared to point it at him.

This challenge was hardly less alarming than the other, for Hyacinth was far from having ascertained the extent of his advance. He replied, however, with an earnestness with which he tried to make up as far as possible for his vagueness: "Well, I'm very strong indeed. I think I see my way to conclusions from which even M. and Madame Poupin would shrink. Poupin, at any rate; I'm not so sure about his wife."

"I should like so much to know Madame," Lady Aurora murmured, as if politeness demanded that she should content herself with this answer.

"Oh, Puppin isn't strong," said Muniment; "you can easily look over his head. He has a sweet assortment of phrases — they are really pretty things to hear, some of them; but he hasn't had a new idea since 1848. It's the old stock faded with being kept in the window. All the same, he warms one up; he has got a spark of the sacred fire. The principal conclusion that Mr. Robinson sees his way to," he added to Lady Aurora, "is that your father ought to have his head chopped off and carried on a pike."

"Ah, yes, the French Revolution."

"Heavens! I don't know anything about your father, ma'am!" Hyacinth interposed.

"Didn't you ever hear of the Earl of Inglefield?" cried Rose Muniment.

"He is one of the best," said Lady Aurora, as if she were pleading for him.

"Very likely, but he is a landlord, and he has an hereditary seat and a park of five thousand acres all to himself, while we are bundled together into this sort of kennel." Hyacinth admired the young man's consistency until he saw that he was chaffing; after which he still admired the way he mixed up merriment with the tremendous opinions our hero was sure he entertained. In his own imagination Hyacinth associated bitterness with the revolutionary passion; but the young chemist, at the same time that he was planning far ahead, seemed capable of turning revolutionists themselves into ridicule, even for the entertainment of the revolutionized.

"Well, I have told you often enough that I don't go with you at all," said Rose Muniment, whose recumbency appeared not in the least to interfere with her vivacity. "You'll make a tremendous mistake if you try to turn everything round. There ought to be differences, arid high and low, and there always will be, true as ever I lie here. I think it's against everything, pulling down them that's above."

"Everything points to great changes in this country, but if once our Rosy's again' them, how can you be sure? That's the only thing that makes me doubt," her brother went on, looking at her with a placidity which showed the habit of indulgence.

"Well, I may be ill, but I ain't buried, and if I'm content with my position — such a position as it is — surely other folk might be with theirs. Her ladyship may think I'm as good as her, if she takes that notion; but she'll have a deal to do to make me believe it."

"I think you are much better than I, and I know very few people so good as you," Lady Aurora remarked, blushing, not for her opinions, but for her timidity. It was easy to see that, though she was original, she would have liked to be even more original than she was. She was conscious, however, that such a declaration might appear rather gross to persons who didn't see exactly how she meant it, so she added, as quickly as her hesitating manner permitted, to cover it up, "You know there's one thing you ought to remember, apropos of revolutions and changes and all that sort of thing; I just mention it because we were talking of some of the dreadful things that were done in France. If there were to be a great disturbance in this country — and of course one hopes there won't — it would be my impression that the people would behave in. a different way altogether."

"What people do you mean?" Hyacinth allowed himself to inquire.

"Oh, the upper class, the people that have got all the things."

"We don't call them the people," observed Hyacinth, reflecting the next instant that his remark was a little primitive.

"I suppose you call them the wretches, the villains!" Rose Muniment suggested, laughing merrily.

"All the things, but not all the brains," her brother said.

"No, indeed, aren't they stupid?" exclaimed her ladyship. "All the same, I don't think they would go abroad."

“Go abroad?”

“I mean like the French nobles, who emigrated so much. They would stay at home and resist; they would make more of a fight. I think they would fight very hard.”

“I’m delighted to hear it, and I’m sure they would win!” cried Rosy.

“They wouldn’t collapse, don’t you know,” Lady Aurora continued. “They would struggle till they were beaten.”

“And you think they would be beaten in the end?” Hyacinth asked.

“Oh, dear, yes,” she replied, with a familiar brevity at which he was greatly surprised. “But of course one hopes it won’t happen.”

“I infer from what you say that they talk it over a good deal among themselves, to settle the line they will take,” said Paul Muniment.

But Rosy cut in before Lady Aurora could answer. “I think it’s wicked to talk it over, and I’m sure we haven’t any business to talk it over here! When her ladyship says that the aristocracy will make a fine stand, I like to hear her say it, and I think she speaks in a manner that becomes her own position. But there is something else in her tone which, if I may be allowed to say so, I think a great mistake. If her ladyship expects, in case of the lower classes coming up in that odious manner, to be let off easily, for the sake of the concessions she may have made in advance, I would just advise her to save herself the disappointment and the trouble. They won’t be a bit the wiser, and they won’t either know or care. If they are going to trample over their betters, it isn’t on account of her having seemed to give up everything to us here that they will let her off. They will trample on her just the same as on the others, and they’ll say that she has got to pay for her title and her grand relations and her fine appearance. Therefore I advise her not to waste her good nature in trying to let herself down. When you ‘re up so high as that you’ve got to stay there; and if Providence has made you a lady, the best thing you can do is to hold up your head. I can promise your ladyship I should.”

The close logic of this speech and the quaint self-possession with which the little bedridden speaker delivered it struck Hyacinth as amazing, and confirmed his idea that the brother and sister were a most extraordinary pair. It had a terrible effect upon poor Lady Aurora, by whom so stern a lesson from so humble a quarter had evidently not been expected, and who sought refuge from her confusion in a series of bewildered laughs, while Paul Muniment, with his humorous density, which was deliberate and clever, too, not seeing, or at any rate not heeding, that she had been sufficiently snubbed by his sister, inflicted a fresh humiliation by saying, “Rosy’s right, my lady. It’s no use trying to buy yourself off. You can’t do enough; your sacrifices don’t count. You spoil your fun now, and you don’t get it made up to you later. To all you people nothing will ever be made up. Enjoy your privileges while they last; it may not be for long.”

Lady Aurora listened to him with her eyes on his face; and as they .rested there Hyacinth scarcely knew what to make of her expression. Afterward he thought he could attach a meaning to it. She got up quickly when Muniment had ceased speaking; the movement suggested that she had taken offense, and he would have liked to show her that he thought she had been rather roughly used. But she gave him no chance, not glancing at him for a moment. Then he saw that he was mistaken, and that, if she had flushed considerably, it was only with the excitement of pleasure, the enjoyment of such original talk, and of seeing her friends at last as free and familiar as she wished them to be. “You are the most delightful people — I wish every one could know you!” she broke out. “But I must really be going.” She went to the bed, and bent over Rosy and kissed her.

“Paul will see you as far as you like on your way home,” this young woman remarked.

Lady Aurora protested against this, but Paul, without protesting in return, only took up his hat and looked at her, smiling, as if he knew his duty; upon which her ladyship said, “Well, you may see me downstairs; I forgot it was so dark.”

“You must take her ladyship’s own candle, and you must call a cab,” Rosy directed.

“Oh, I don’t go in cabs. I walk.”

“Well, you may go on the top of a ‘bus, if you like; you can’t help being superb,” Miss Muniment declared, watching her sympathetically.

“Superb? Oh, mercy!” cried the poor devoted, grotesque lady, leaving the room with Paul, who asked Hyacinth to wait for him a little. She neglected to bid goodnight to our young man, and he asked himself what was to be hoped from that sort of people, when even the best of them — those that wished to be agreeable to the demos — reverted inevitably to the supercilious. She had said no more about lending him her books.

Chapter IX

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“SHE LIVES IN Belgrave Square; she has ever so many brothers and sisters; one of her sisters is married to Lord Warmington,” Rose Muniment instantly began, not, apparently, in the least discomposed at being left alone with a strange young man in a room which was now half dark again, thanks to her brother’s having carried off the second and more brilliant candle. She was so interested, for the time, in telling Hyacinth the history of Lady Aurora that she appeared not to remember how little she knew about himself. Her ladyship had dedicated

her life and her pocket-money to the poor and sick; she cared nothing for parties, and races, and dances, and picnics, and life in great houses, the usual amusements of the aristocracy; she was like one of the saints of old, come to life again, out of a legend. She had made their acquaintance, Paul's and hers, about a year before, through a friend of theirs, such a fine, brave young woman, who was in St. Thomas's Hospital for a surgical operation. She had been laid up there for weeks, during which Lady Aurora, always looking out for those who couldn't help themselves, used to come and talk to her and read to her, till the end of her time in the ward, when the poor girl, parting with her kind friend, told her how she knew of another unfortunate creature (for whom there was no place there, because she was incurable), who would be mighty thankful for any little attention of that sort. She had given Lady Aurora the address in Audley Court, and the very next day her ladyship had knocked at their door. It wasn't because she was poor — though in all conscience they were pinched enough — but because she had no use of her body. Lady Aurora came very often, for several months, without meeting Paul, because he was always at his work; but one day he came home early, on purpose to find her, to thank her for her goodness, and also to see (Miss Muniment rather slyly intimated) whether she were really so good as his extravagant little sister made her out. Rosy had a triumph after that: Paul had to admit that her ladyship was beyond anything that any one in his waking senses would believe. She seemed to want to give up everything to those who were below her, and never to expect any thanks at all. And she wasn't always preaching and showing you your duty; she wanted to talk to you sociable-like, as if you were just her own sister. And her own sisters were the highest in the land, and you might see her name in the newspapers the day they were presented to the Queen. Lady Aurora had been presented, too, with feathers in her head and a long tail to her gown; but she had turned her back upon it all with a kind of terror — a sort of shivering, sinking feeling, which she had often described to Miss Muniment. The day she had first seen Paul was the day they became so intimate (the three of them together), if she might apply such a word as that to such a peculiar connection. The little woman, the little girl, as she lay there (Hyacinth scarcely knew how to characterize her), told our young man a very great secret, in which he found himself too much interested to think of criticising so headlong a burst of confidence. The secret was that, of all the people she had ever seen in the world, her ladyship thought Rosy's Paul the very cleverest. And she had seen the greatest, the most famous, the brightest of every kind, for they all came to stay at Inglefield, thirty and forty of them at once. She had talked with them all and heard them say their best (and you could fancy how they would try to give it out at such a place as that, where there was nearly a mile of conservatories, and a hundred wax candles were lighted at a time), and at the end of it all she had made the remark to herself — and she had made it to Rosy, too — that there was none of them had such a head on his shoulders as the young man in Audley Court. Rosy wouldn't spread such a rumor as that in the court itself, but she wanted every friend of her brother's (and she could see Hyacinth was that, by the way he listened) to know what was thought of him by them that had an experience of talent. She didn't wish to give it out that her ladyship had lowered herself in any manner to a person that earned his bread in a dirty shop (clever as he might be), but it was easy to see she minded what be said as if he had been a bishop — or more, indeed, for she didn't think much of bishops, any more than Paul himself, and that was an idea she had got from him. Oh, she took it none so ill if he came back from his work before she had gone; and tonight Hyacinth could see for himself how she had lingered. This evening, she was sure, her ladyship would let him walk home with her half the way. This announcement gave Hyacinth the prospect of a considerable session with his communicative hostess; but he was very glad to wait, for he was vaguely, strangely excited by her talk, fascinated by the little queer-smelling, high-perched interior, encumbered with relics, treasured and polished, of a poor North Country house, bedecked with penny ornaments, and related in so unexpected a manner to Belgrave Square and the great landed estates. He spent half an hour with Paul Muniment's small, odd, crippled, chattering, clever, trenchant sister, who gave him an impression of education and native wit (she expressed herself far better than Pinnie, or than Millicent Henning), and who startled, puzzled, and at the same time rather distressed him by the manner in which she referred herself to the most abject class — the class that prostrated itself, that was in a fever and flutter in the presence of its betters. That was Pinnie's turn, of course; but Hyacinth had long ago perceived that his adoptive mother had generations of plebeian patience in her blood, and that, though she had a tender soul, she had not a great one. She was more entertained than afflicted, however, by Miss Muniment's tone, and he was thrilled by the frequency and familiarity of her allusions to a kind of life he had often wondered about; this was the first time he had heard it described with that degree of authority. By the nature of his mind he was perpetually, almost morbidly, conscious that the circle in which he lived was an infinitesimally small, shallow eddy in the roaring vortex of London, and his imagination plunged again and again into the waves that whirled past it and round it, in the hope of being carried to some brighter, happier vision — the vision of societies in which, in splendid rooms, with smiles and soft voices, distinguished men, with women who were both proud and gentle, talked about art, literature, and history. When Rosy had delivered herself to her complete satisfaction on the subject of Lady Aurora, she became more quiet, asking, as yet, however, no questions about Hyacinth, whom she seemed to take very much for granted. He presently remarked that she must let him come very soon again, and he added, to explain this wish, "You know you seem to me very curious people."

Miss Muniment did not in the least repudiate the imputation. "Oh, yes, I dare say we seem very curious. I think we are generally thought so, especially me, being so miserable and yet so lively." And she laughed till her bed creaked again.

“Perhaps it’s lucky you are ill; perhaps if you had your health you would be all over the place,” Hyacinth suggested. And he went on, candidly, “I can’t make it out, your being so up in everything.”

“I don’t see why you need make it out! But you would, perhaps, if you had known my father and mother.” “Were they such a rare lot?” “I think you would say so if you had ever been in the mines. Yes, in the mines, where the filthy coal is dug out. That’s where my father came from — he was working in the pit when he was a child of ten. He never had a day’s schooling in his life; but he climbed up out of his black hole into daylight and air, and he invented a machine, and he married my mother, who came out of Durham, and (by her people) out of the pits and misery, too. My father was short arid stumpy, but she was magnificent — the finest woman in the country, and the bravest, and the best. She’s in her grave now, and I couldn’t go to look at it even if it were in the nearest churchyard. My father was small and quick and black: I know I’m just his pattern, barring that he did have his legs, when the liquor hadn’t got into them. But between him and my mother, for grand, high intelligence, there wasn’t much to choose. But what’s the use of brains if you haven’t got a backbone? My poor father had no more of that in his character than I have in my poor body. He invented a machine, and he sold it, at Bradford, for fifteen pounds: I mean the whole right of it, and every hope and pride of his family. He was always straying, and my mother was always bringing him back. She had plenty to do, with me a puny, ailing brat from the moment I opened my eyes. Well, one night he strayed so far that he never came back; or only came back a loose bloody bundle of clothes. Pie had fallen into a gravel-pit; he didn’t know where he was going. That’s the reason my brother will never touch so much as you could wet your finger with, and that I only have a drop once a week or so, in the way of a strengthener. I take what her ladyship brings me, but I take no more. If she could have come to us before my mother went, that would have been a saving. I was only nine when my father died, and I’m three years older than Paul. My mother did for us with all her might, and she kept us decent — if such a scrap as me can be said to be decent. At any rate, she kept me alive, and that’s a proof she was handy. She went to the wash-tub, and she might have been a queen, as she stood there with her bare arms ill the foul linen and her long hair braided on her head. She was wonderful handsome, but he would have been a bold man that would have taken upon himself to tell her so. And it was from her we got our education — she was determined we should rise above the common. You might have thought, in her position, that she couldn’t go into such things; but she was a rare one for keeping you at your book. She could hold to her idea when my poor father couldn’t; and her idea, for us, was that Paul should get learning and should look after me. You can see for yourself that that’s what has come about. How he got it is more than I can say, as we never had a penny to pay for it; and of course my mother’s cleverness wouldn’t have been of much use if he hadn’t been clever himself. Well, it was all in the family. Paul was a boy that would learn more from a yellow placard pasted on a wall, or a time - table at a railway station, than many a young fellow from a year at college. That was his only college, poor lad — picking up what he could. Mother was taken when she was still needed, nearly five years ago. There was an epidemic of typhoid, and of course it must pass me over, the goose of a thing — only that I ‘d have made a poor feast — and just lay that gallant creature on her back. Well, she never again made it ache over her soapsuds; straight and broad as it was. Not having seen her, you wouldn’t believe,” said Rosy Muniment, in conclusion; “but I just wanted you to understand that our parents had intellect, at least, to give us.”

Hyacinth listened to this recital with the deepest interest, and without being in the least moved to allow for filial exaggeration; inasmuch as his impression of the brother and sister was such as it would have taken a much more marvelous tale to account for. The very way Rose Muniment sounded the word “intellect” made him feel this; she pronounced it as if she were distributing prizes for a high degree of it. No doubt the tipsy inventor and the queenly laundress had been fine specimens, but that didn’t diminish the merit of their highly original offspring. The girl’s insistence upon her mother’s virtues (even now that her age had become more definite to him he thought of her as a girl) touched in his heart a chord that was always ready to throb — the chord of melancholy, bitter, aimless wonder as to the difference it would have made in his spirit if there had been some pure, honorable figure like that to shed her influence over it.

“Are you very fond of your brother?” he inquired, after a little.

The eyes of his hostess glittered at him for a moment. “If you ever quarrel with him, you will see whose side I’ll take.”

“Ah, before that I shall make you like me.”

“That’s very possible, and you’ll see I will fling you over!”

“Why, then, do you object so to his views — his ideas about the way the people will come up?”

“Because I think he’ll get over them.”

“Never — never!” cried Hyacinth. “I have only known him an hour or two, but I deny that with all my strength.”

“Is that the way you are going to make me like you — contradicting me so?” Miss Muniment inquired, with familiar archness.

“What’s the use, when you tell me I shall be sacrificed? One might as well perish for a lamb as for a sheep.”

“I don’t believe you ‘re a lamb at all. Certainly you are not, if you want all the great people pulled down, and the most dreadful scenes enacted.”

“Don’t you believe in human equality? Don’t you want anything done for the groaning, toiling millions — those who have been cheated, and crushed, and bamboozled from the beginning of time?”

Hyacinth asked this question with considerable heat, but the effect of it was to send his companion off into a new fit of laughter. “You say that just like a man that my brother described to me three days ago; a little man at some club, whose hair stood up — Paul imitated the way he glared and screamed. I don’t mean that you scream, you know; but you use almost the same words that he did.” Hyacinth scarcely knew what to make of this allusion, or of the picture offered to him of Paul Muniment casting ridicule upon those who spoke in the name of the downtrodden. But Rosy went on before he had time to do more than reflect that there would evidently be a great deal more to learn about her brother: “I haven’t the least objection to seeing the people improved; but I don’t want to see the aristocracy lowered an inch. I like so much to look at it up there.”

“You ought to know my aunt Pinnie — she’s just such another benighted idolater!” Hyacinth exclaimed.

“Oh, you are making me like you very fast! And pray, who is your aunt Pinnie?”

“She’s a dressmaker, and a charming little woman. I should like her to come and see you.”

“I’m afraid I’m not in her line — I never had on a dress in my life. But, as a charming woman, I should be delighted to see her.”

“I will bring her some day,” said Hyacinth. And then he added, rather incongruously, for he was irritated by the girl’s optimism, thinking it a shame that her sharpness should be enlisted on the wrong side, “Don’t you want, for yourself, a better place to live in?”

She jerked herself up, and for a moment he thought she would jump out of her bed at him. “A better place than this? Pray, how could there be a better place? Every one thinks it’s lovely; you should see our view by daylight — you should see everything I’ve got. Perhaps you are used to something very fine, but Lady Aurora says that in all Belgrave Square there isn’t such a cosy little room. If you think I’m not perfectly content, you are very much mistaken.”

Such a sentiment as that could only exasperate Hyacinth,-and his exasperation made him indifferent to the fact that he had appeared to cast discredit on Miss Muniment’s apartment. Pinnie herself, submissive as she was, had spared him that sort of displeasure; she groaned over the dinginess of Lomax Place sufficiently to remind him that she had not been absolutely stultified by misery. “Don’t you sometimes make your brother very angry?” he asked, smiling, of Rose Muniment.

“Angry? I don’t know what you take us for! I never saw him lose his temper in his life.”

“He must be a rum customer! Doesn’t he really care for — for what we were talking about?”

For a moment .Rosy was silent; then she replied, “What my brother really cares for — well, one of these days, when you know, you’ll tell me.”

Hyacinth stared. “But isn’t he tremendously deep in” — He hesitated.

“Deep in what?”

“Well, in what’s going on, beneath the surface. Doesn’t he belong to things?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what he belongs to — you may ask him!” cried Rosy, laughing gayly again, as the opening door readmitted the subject of their conversation. “You must have crossed the water with her ladyship,” she went on. “I wonder who enjoyed their walk most.”

“She’s a tidy old girl, and she has a goodish stride,” said the young man.

“I think she’s in love with you, simply, Mr. Muniment.”

“Really, my dear, for an admirer of the aristocracy you allow yourself a license,” Paul murmured, smiling at Hyacinth.

Hyacinth got up, feeling that really he had paid a long visit; his curiosity was far from satisfied, but there was a limit to the time one should spend in a young lady’s sleeping apartment. “Perhaps she is; why not?” he remarked.

“Perhaps she is, then; she’s daft enough for anything.”

“There have been fine folks before who have patted the people on the back and pretended to enter into their life,” Hyacinth said. “Is she only playing with that idea, or is she in earnest?”

“In earnest — in terrible earnest, my dear fellow. I think she must be rather crowded out at home.”

“Crowded out of Inglefield? Why there’s room for three hundred!” Rosy broke in.

“Well, if that’s the kind of mob that’s in possession, no wonder she prefers Lambeth. We must be kind to the poor lady,” Paul added, in a tone which Hyacinth noticed. He attributed a remarkable meaning to it; it seemed to say that people such as he were now so sure of their game that they could afford to be magnanimous; or be it expressed a prevision of the doom which hung over her ladyship’s head. Muniment asked if Hyacinth and Rosy had made friends, and the girl replied that Mr. Robinson had made himself very agreeable. “Then you must tell me all about him after he goes, for you know I don’t know him much myself,” said her brother.

“Oh, yes, I’ll tell you everything; you know how I like describing.”

Hyacinth was laughing to himself at the young lady’s account of his efforts to please her, the fact being that he had only listened to her own eager discourse, without opening his mouth; but Paul, whether or no he guessed the truth, said to him, very pertinently, “It’s very wonderful: she can describe things she has never seen. And they are just like the reality.”

“There’s nothing I’ve never seen,” Rosy rejoined. “That’s the advantage of my lying here in such a manner. I see everything in the world.”

“You don’t seem to see your brother’s meetings — his secret societies and clubs. You put that aside when I asked you.”

“Oh, you mustn’t ask her that sort of thing,” said Paul, lowering at Hyacinth with a fierce frown — an expression which he perceived in a moment to be humorously assumed.

“What am I to do, then, since you won’t tell me anything definite yourself?”

“It will be definite enough when you get hanged for it!” Rosy exclaimed, mockingly.

“Why do you want to poke your head into black holes?” Muniment asked, laying his hand on Hyacinth’s shoulder, and shaking it gently.

“Don’t you belong to the party of action?” said Hyacinth, solemnly.

“Look at the way he has picked up all the silly bits of catchwords!” Paul cried, laughing, to his sister. “You must have got that precious phrase out of the newspapers, out of some driveling leader. Is that the party you want to belong to?” he went on, with his clear eyes ranging up and down our hero’s few inches.

“If you’ll show me the thing itself I shall have no more occasion to mind the newspapers,” Hyacinth pleaded. It was his view of himself, and it was not an unfair one, that his was a character that would never beg for a favor; but now he felt that in any relation he might have with Paul Muniment such a law would be suspended. This man he could entreat, pray to, go on his knees to, without a sense of humiliation.

“What thing do you mean, infatuated, deluded youth?” Paul went on, refusing to be serious.

“Well, you know you do go to places you had far better keep out of, and that often when I lie here and listen to steps on the stairs I’m sure they are coming in to make a search for your papers,” Miss Muniment lucidly interposed.

“The day they find my papers, my dear, will be the day you’ll get up and dance.”

“What did you ask me to come home with you for?” Hyacinth demanded, twirling his hat. It was an effort for him, for a moment, to keep the tears out of his eyes; he found himself forced to put such a different construction on his new friend’s hospitality. He had had a happy impression that Muniment perceived in him a possible associate, of a high type, in a subterranean crusade against the existing order of things, and now it came over him that the real use he had been put to was to beguile an hour for a pert invalid. That was all very well, and he would sit by Miss Rosy’s bedside, were it a part of his service, every day in the week; only in such a case it should be his reward to enjoy the confidence of her brother. This young man, at the present juncture, justified the high estimate that Lady Aurora Langrish had formed of his intelligence: whatever his natural reply to Hyacinth’s question would have been, he invented, at the moment, a better one, and said, at random, smiling, and not knowing exactly what he meant, “What did I ask you to come with me for? To see if you would be afraid.”

What there was to be afraid of was to Hyacinth a quantity equally vague; but he rejoined, quickly enough, “I think you have only to try me to see.”

“I’m sure, if you introduce him to some of your low, wicked friends, he’ll be quite satisfied after he has looked round a bit,” Miss Muniment remarked, irrepressibly.

“Those are just the kind of people I want to know,” said Hyacinth, ingenuously.

This quality appeared to touch Paul Muniment. “Well, I see you ‘re a good un. Just meet me some night.”

“Where, where?” asked Hyacinth, eagerly.

“Oh, I’ll tell you where when we get away from her,” said his friend, laughing, but leading him out of the room again.

Chapter X

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SEVERAL MONTHS after Hyacinth had made the acquaintance of Paul Muniment, Millicent Henning remarked to him that it was high time he should take her to some place of amusement. He proposed the Canterbury Music Hall; whereupon she tossed her head, and remarked that when a young lady had done for a young man what she had done for him, the least he could do was to take her to some theatre in the Strand. Hyacinth would have been a good deal at a loss to say exactly what she had done for him but it was familiar to him, by this time, that she regarded him as under great obligations. From the day she came to look him up in Lomax Place she had taken a position, largely, in his life, and he had seen poor Pinnie’s wan countenance grow several degrees more blank. Amanda Pynsent’s forebodings had been answered to the letter: that bold-faced apparition had become a permanent influence. She never spoke to him about Millicent but once, several weeks after her interview with the girl; and this was not in a tone of rebuke, for she had divested herself forever of any maternal prerogative. Tearful, tremulous, deferential inquiry was now her only weapon, and nothing could be more humble and circumspect than the manner in which she made use of it. He was never at home of an evening, at present, and he had mysterious ways of spending his Sundays, with which church-going had nothing to do. The time had been when, often, after tea, he sat near the lamp with the dressmaker, and, while her fingers flew, read out to her the works of Dickens and of Scott; happy hours, when he appeared to have forgotten the wrong she had done him, and she almost forgot it herself. But now he gulped down his tea so fast that he hardly took off his hat while he sat there, and Pinnie, with her quick eye for all matters of costume, noticed that he wore it still more gracefully askew than usual, with a little victorious, exalted air. He hummed

to himself; he fingered his mustache; he looked out of the window when there was nothing to look at; he seemed preoccupied, absorbed in intellectual excursions, half anxious and half delighted. During the whole winter Miss Pynsent explained everything by three words murmured beneath her breath: “That forward jade.” On the single occasion, however, on which she sought relief from her agitation in an appeal to Hyacinth, she did not trust herself to designate the girl by any epithet or title.

“There is only one thing I want to know,” she said to him, in a manner which might have seemed casual if in her silence, knowing her as well as he did, he had not already perceived the implication of her thought. “Does she expect you to marry her, dearest?”

“Does who expect me? I should like to see the woman who does!”

“Of course you know who I mean. The one that came after you — and picked you right up — from the other end of London.” And at the remembrance of that insufferable scene poor Pinnie flamed up for a moment. “Isn’t there plenty of young fellows down in that low part where she lives, without her ravaging over here? Why can’t she stick to her own beat, I should like to know?” Hyacinth had flushed at this inquiry, and she saw something in his face which made her change her tone. “Just promise me this, my precious child: that if you get into any sort of mess with that piece you’ll immediately confide it to your poor old Pinnie.”

“My poor old Pinnie sometimes makes me quite sick,” Hyacinth remarked, for answer. “What sort of a mess do you suppose I’ll get into?”

“Well, suppose she does come it over you that you promised to marry her?”

“You don’t know what you ‘re talking about. She doesn’t want to marry any one to-day.”

“Then what does she want to do?”

“Do you suppose I would tell a lady’s secrets?” the young man inquired.

“Dear me, if she was a lady, I shouldn’t be afraid!” said Pinnie.

“Every woman’s a lady when she has placed herself under one’s protection,” Hyacinth rejoined, with his little manner of a man of the world.

“Under your protection? Laws!” cried Pinnie, staring. “And pray, who’s to protect you?”

As soon as she had said this she repented, because it seemed just the sort of exclamation that would have made Hyacinth bite her head off. One of the things she loved him for, however, was that he gave you touching surprises in this line, had sudden inconsistencies of temper that were all for your advantage. He was by no means always mild when he ought to have been, but he was sometimes so when there was no obligation. At such moments Pinnie wanted to kiss him, and she had often tried to make Mr. Vetch understand what a fascinating trait of character this was on the part of their young friend. It was rather difficult to describe, and Mr. Vetch never would admit that he understood, or that he had observed anything that seemed to correspond to the dressmaker’s somewhat confused psychological sketch. It was a comfort to her in these days, and almost the only one she had, that she was sure Theophilus Vetch understood a good deal more than he felt bound to acknowledge. He was always up to his old game of being a great deal cleverer than cleverness itself required; and it consoled her present weak, pinched feeling to know that, although he still talked of the boy as if it would be a pity to take him too seriously, that wasn’t the way he thought of him. He also took him seriously, and he had even a certain sense of duty in regard to him. Miss Pynsent went so far as to say to herself that the fiddler probably had savings, and that no one had ever known of any one else belonging to him. She wouldn’t have mentioned it to Hyacinth for the world, for fear of leading up to a disappointment; but she had visions of a foolscap sheet, folded away in some queer little bachelor’s box (she couldn’t fancy what men kept in such places), on which Hyacinth’s name would have been written down, in very big letters, before a solicitor.

“Oh, I’m unprotected, in the nature of things,” he replied, smiling at his too scrupulous companion. Then he added, “At any rate, it isn’t from that girl any danger will come to me.”

“I can’t think why you like her,” Pinnie remarked, as if she had spent on the subject treasures of impartiality.

“It’s jolly to hear one woman on the subject of another,” Hyacinth said. “You ‘re kind and good, and yet you are ready” — He gave a philosophic sigh.

“Well, what am I ready to do? I’m not ready to see you gobbled up before my eyes!”

“You needn’t be afraid; she won’t drag me to the altar.”

“And pray, doesn’t she think you good enough — for one of the Hennings?”

“You don’t understand, my poor Pinnie,” said Hyacinth, wearily. “I sometimes think there isn’t a single thing in life that you understand. One of these days she’ll marry an alderman.”

“An alderman — that creature?”

“An alderman, or a banker, or a bishop, or some one of that kind. She doesn’t want to end her career to-day; she wants to begin it.”

“Well, I wish she would take you later!” the dressmaker exclaimed.

Hyacinth said nothing for a moment; then he broke out: “What are you afraid of? Look here, we had better clear this up, once for all. Are you afraid of my marrying a girl out of a shop?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t, would you?” cried Pinnie, with a kind of conciliatory eagerness. “That’s the way I like to hear you talk!”

“Do you think I would marry any one who would marry me?” Hyacinth went on. “The kind of girl who would look at me is the kind of girl I wouldn’t look at.” He struck Pinnie as having thought it all out; which

did not surprise her, as she had been familiar, from his youth, with his way of following things up. But she was always delighted when he made a remark which showed he was conscious of being of fine clay — flashed out an allusion to his not being what he seemed. He was not what he seemed, but even with Pinnie's valuable assistance he had not succeeded in representing to himself, very definitely, what he was. She had placed at his disposal, for this purpose, a passionate optimism which, employed in some larger cause, might have been termed profligate, and which never cost her a scruple or a compunction.

"I'm sure a princess might look at you and be none the worse!" she declared, in her delight at this assurance, more positive than any she had yet received, that he was safe from the worst danger. This the dressmaker considered,-to be the chance of his marrying some person like herself. Still it came over her that his taste might be lowered, and before the subject was dropped, on this occasion, she said to him that of course he must be quite aware of all that was wanting to such a girl as Millicent Henning — she pronounced her name at last.

"Oh, I don't bother about what's wanting to her; I'm content with what she has."

"Content, dearest — how do you mean?" the little dressmaker quavered. "Content to make an intimate friend of her?"

"It is impossible I should discuss these matters with you," Hyacinth replied, grandly.

"Of course I see that. But I should think she would bore you, sometimes," Miss Pynsent murmured, cunningly.

"She does, I assure you, to extinction!"

"Then why do you spend every evening with her?"

"Where should you like me to spend my evenings? At some beastly public house — or at the Italian opera?" His association with Miss Henning was not so close as that, but nevertheless he wouldn't take the trouble to prove to poor Pinnie that be enjoyed her society only two or three times a week; that on other evenings he simply strolled about the streets (this boyish habit clung to him), and that he had even occasionally the resource of going to the Poupins', or of gossiping and smoking a pipe at some open house-door, when the night was not cold, with a fellow-mechanic. Later in the winter, after he had made Paul Muniment's acquaintance, the aspect of his life changed considerably, though Millicent continued to be exceedingly mixed up with it. He hated the taste of liquor, and, still more, the taste of the places where it was sold; besides which the types of misery and vice that one was liable to see collected in them frightened and harrowed him, made him ask himself questions that pierced the deeper because they were met by no answer. It was both a blessing and a drawback to him that the delicate, charming character of the work he did at Mr. Crookenden's, under Eustache Poupiu's influence, was a kind of education of the taste, trained him in the finest discriminations, in the perception of beauty and the hatred of ugliness. This made the brutal, garish, stodgy decoration of public houses, with their deluge of gaslight, their glittering brass and pewter, their lumpish woodwork and false colors, detestable to him; he was still very young when the "gin palace" ceased to convey to him an idea of the palatial.

For this unfortunate but remarkably organized youth, every displeasure or gratification of the visual sense colored his whole mind, and though he lived in Lomax Place and worked in Soho, though he was poor, and obscure, and cramped, and full of unattainable desires, it may be said of him that what was most important in life for him was simply his impressions. They came from everything he touched, they kept him thrilling and throbbing during a considerable part of his waking consciousness, arid they constituted, as yet, the principal events and stages of his career. Fortunately, they were sometimes very delightful. Everything in the field of observation suggested this or that; everything struck him, penetrated, stirred; he had, in a word, more impressions than he knew what to do with — felt, sometimes, as if they would consume or asphyxiate him. He liked to talk about them, but it was only a few, here and there, that he could discuss with Millicent Henning. He let Miss Pynsent imagine that his hours of leisure were almost exclusively dedicated to this young lady, because, as he said to himself, if he were to account to her for every evening in the week, it would make no difference — she would stick to her suspicion; and he referred this perversity to the general weight of misconception under which (at this crude period of his growth) he held it was his lot to languish. It didn't matter to one whether one were a little more or a little less misunderstood. He might have remembered that it mattered to Pinnie, who, after her first relief at hearing him express himself so properly on the subject of a matrimonial connection with Miss Henning, allowed her faded, kind, weak face, little by little, to lengthen out to its old solemnity. This came as the days went on, for it wasn't much comfort that he didn't want to marry the young woman in Pimlico, when he allowed himself to be held as tight as if he did. For the present, indeed, she simply said, "Oh, well, if you see her as she is, I don't care what you do" — a sentiment implying a certain moral recklessness on the part of the good little dressmaker. She was irreproachable herself, but she had lived for more than fifty years in a world of wickedness; like an immense number of London women of her class and kind, she had acquired a certain innocent cynicism, and she judged it quite a minor evil that Millicent should be left lamenting, if only Hyacinth might get out of the scrape. Between a forsaken maiden and a premature, lowering marriage for her beloved little boy, she very well knew which she preferred. It should be added that her impression of Millicent's power to take care of herself was such as to make it absurd to pity her in advance. Pinnie thought Hyacinth the cleverest young man in the world, but her state of mind implied somehow that the young lady in Pimlico was cleverer. Her ability, at any rate, was of a kind that precluded the idea of

suffering, whereas Hyacinth's was rather associated with it.

By the time he had enjoyed for three months the acquaintance of the brother and sister in Audley Court the whole complexion of his life seemed changed; it was pervaded by an interest, an excitement, which overshadowed, though it by no means supplanted, the brilliant figure of Miss Henning. It was pitched in a higher key, altogether, and appeared to command a view of horizons equally fresh and vast. Millicent, therefore, shared her dominion, without knowing exactly what it was that drew her old playfellow off, and without indeed demanding of him an account which, on her own side, she was not prepared to give. Hyacinth was, in the language of the circle in which she moved, her fancy, and she was content to occupy, as regards himself, the same graceful and somewhat irresponsible position. She had an idea that she was a most beneficent friend: fond of him and careful of him as an elder sister might be; warning him as no one else could do against the dangers of the town; putting that sharp common sense, of which she was convinced that she possessed an extraordinary supply, at the service of his incurable verdancy; and looking after him, generally, as no one, poor child, had ever done. Millicent made light of the little dressmaker, in this view of Hyacinth's past (she thought Pinnie no better than a starved cat), and enjoyed herself immensely in the character of guide and philosopher, while she pushed the young man with a robust elbow, or said to him, "Well, you are a sharp one, you are!" Her theory of herself, as we know, was that she was the sweetest girl in the world, as well as the cleverest and handsomest, and there could be no better proof of her kindness of heart than her disinterested affection for a snippet of a bookbinder. Her sociability was certainly great, and so were her vanity, her grossness, her presumption, her appetite for beer, for buns, for entertainment of every kind. She represented, for Hyacinth, during this period, the eternal feminine, and his taste, considering that he was fastidious, will be wondered at; it will be judged that she did not represent it very favorably.

It may easily be believed that he scrutinized his infatuation, even while he gave himself up to it, and that he often wondered that he should care for a girl in whom he found so much to object to. She was vulgar, clumsy, and grotesquely ignorant; her conceit was proportionate, and she had not a grain of tact or of quick perception. And yet there was something so fine about her, to his imagination, and she carried with such an air the advantages she did possess, that her figure constantly mingled itself even with those bright visions that hovered before him after Paul Muniment had opened a mysterious window. She was bold, and free, and generous, and if she was coarse she was neither false nor hard. She laughed with the laugh of the people, and if you hit her hard enough she would cry with its tears. When Hyacinth was not letting his imagination wander among the haunts of the aristocracy, and fancying himself stretched in the shadow of an ancestral beech, reading the last number of the Revue des Deux Mondes, he was occupied with contemplations of a very different kind; he was absorbed in the struggles and sufferings of the millions whose life flowed in the same current as his, and who, though they constantly excited his disgust, and made him shrink and turn away, had the power to chain his sympathy, to make it glow to a kind of ecstasy, to convince him, for the time at least, that real success in the world would be to do something with them and for them. All this, strange to say, was never so vivid to him as when he was in Millicent's company; which is a proof of his fantastic, erratic way of seeing things. She had no such ideas about herself; they were almost the only ideas she didn't have. She had no theories about redeeming or uplifting the people; she simply loathed them, because they were so dirty, with the outspoken violence of one who had known poverty, and the strange bedfellows it makes, in a very different degree from Hyacinth, brought up, comparatively, with Pinnie to put sugar in his tea, and keep him supplied with neckties, like a little swell. Millicent, to hear her talk, only wanted to keep her skirts clear, and marry some respectable tea - merchant. But for our hero she was magnificently plebeian, in the sense that implied a kind of loud recklessness of danger, and the qualities that shine forth in a row. She summed up the sociable, humorous, ignorant chatter of the masses, their capacity for offensive and defensive passion, their instinctive perception of their strength on the day they should really exercise it; and as much as any of this, their ideal of something smug and prosperous, where washed hands, and plates in rows on dressers, and stuffed birds under glass, and family photographs, would symbolize success. She was none the less plucky for being at bottom a shameless Philistine, ambitious of a front garden with rockwork; and she presented the plebeian character in none the less plastic a form. Having the history of the French Revolution at his fingers' ends, Hyacinth could easily see her (if there should ever be barricades in the streets of London), with a red cap of liberty on her head, and her white throat bared so that she should be able to shout the louder the Marseillaise of that hour, whatever it might be. If the festival of the Goddess of Reason should ever be enacted in the British metropolis (and Hyacinth could consider such possibilities without a smile, so much was it a part of the little religion he had to remember, always, that there was no knowing what might happen) — if this solemnity, I say, should be revived in Hyde Park, who was better designated than Miss Henning to figure in a grand, statuesque manner, as the heroine of the occasion? It was plain that she had laid her inconsequent admirer under a peculiar spell, since he could associate her with such scenes as that while she consumed beer and buns at his expense. If she had a weakness, it was for prawns; and she had, all winter, a plan for his taking her down to Gravesend, where this luxury was cheap and abundant, when the fine, long days should arrive. She was never so frank and humorous as when she dwelt on the details of a project of this kind, and then Hyacinth was reminded afresh that it was an immense good fortune for her that she was handsome. If she had been ugly he couldn't have listened to her; but her beauty glorified even her accent, interfused her cockney genius with prismatic hues, gave her a large and constant impunity.

Chapter XI

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SHE DESIRED AT LAST to raise their common experience to a loftier level, to enjoy what she called a high-class treat. Their conversation was condemned, for the most part, to go forward in the streets, the wintry, dusky, foggy streets, which looked bigger and more numerous in their perpetual obscurity, and in which everything was covered with damp, gritty smut, an odor extremely agreeable to Miss Henning. Happily, she shared Hyacinth's relish of vague perambulation, and was still more addicted than he to looking into the windows of shops, before which, in long, contemplative halts, she picked out freely the articles she shouldn't mind calling her own. Hyacinth always pronounced the objects of her selection hideous, and made no scruple to tell her that she had the worst taste of any girl in the place. Nothing that he could say to her affronted her so much, as her pretensions in the way of a cultivated judgment were boundless. Had not, indeed, her natural aptitude been fortified, in the Buckingham Palace Road (there was scarcely anything they didn't sell, in the great shop of which she was an ornament), by daily contact with the freshest products of modern industry? Hyacinth laughed this establishment to scorn, and told her there was nothing in it, from top to bottom, that a real artist would look at. She inquired, with answering derision, if this were a description of his own few inches; but in reality she was fascinated, as much as she was provoked, by his air of being difficult to please, of seeing indescribable differences among things. She had given herself out, originally, as very knowing, but he could make her feel stupid. When, once in a while, he pointed out a commodity that he condescended to like (this didn't happen often, because the only shops in which there was a chance of his making such a discovery were closed at nightfall), she stared, bruised him more or less with her elbow, and declared that if any one should give her such a piece of rubbish she would sell it for fourpence. Once or twice she asked him to be so good as to explain to her in what its superiority consisted — she could not rid herself of a suspicion that there might be something in his opinion, and she was angry at not finding herself as positive as any one. But Hyacinth replied that it was no use attempting to tell her; she wouldn't understand, and she had better continue to admire the insipid productions of an age which had lost the sense of quality — a phrase which she remembered, proposing to herself, even, to make use of it, on some future occasion, but was quite unable to interpret.

When the young man demeaned himself in this manner it was not with a view of strengthening the tie which united him to his childhood's friend; but the effect followed, on Millicent's side, and the girl was proud to think that she was in possession of a young man whose knowledge was of so high an order that it was inexpressible. In spite of her vanity, she was not so convinced of her perfection as not to be full of un-gratifled aspirations; she had an idea that it might be to her advantage some day to exhibit a sample of that learning; and at the same time, when, in consideration, for instance, of a jeweler's gaslighted display in Great Portland Street, Hyacinth lingered for five minutes in perfect silence, while she delivered herself according to her wont at such junctures, she was a thousand miles from guessing the feelings which made it impossible for him to speak. She could long for things she was not likely to have; envy other people for possessing them, and say it was a regular shame (she called it a shime); draw brilliant pictures of what she should do with them if she did have them; and pass immediately, with a mind unencumbered by superfluous inductions, to some other topic, equally intimate and personal. The sense of privation, with her, was often extremely acute; but she could always put her finger on the remedy. With the imaginative, airy-minded little bookbinder the case was very different; the remedy, with him, was terribly vague and impracticable. He was liable to moods in which the sense of exclusion from all that he would have liked most to enjoy in life settled upon him like a pall. They had a bitterness, but they were not invidious — they were not moods of vengeance, of imaginary spoliation: they were simply states of paralyzing melancholy, of infinite sad reflection, in which he felt that in this world of effort and suffering life was endurable, the spirit able to expand, only in the best conditions, and that a sordid struggle, in which one should go down to the grave without having tasted them, was not worth the misery it would cost, the dull demoralization it would entail.

In such hours the great roaring, indifferent world of London seemed to him a huge organization for mocking at his poverty, at his inanition; and then its vulgarest ornaments, the windows of third-rate jewelers, the young man in a white tie and a crush hat who dandled by, on his way to a dinner party, in a hansom that nearly ran over one — these familiar phenomena, because symbolic, insolent, defiant, took upon themselves to make him smart with the sense that he was out of it. He felt, moreover, that there was no consolation or refutation in saying to himself that the immense majority of mankind were out of it with him, and appeared to put up well enough with the annoyance — that was their own affair; he knew nothing of their reasons or their resignation, and if they chose neither to rebel nor to compare, he, at least, among the disinherited, would keep up the standard. When these fits were upon the young man, his brothers of the people fared, collectively, badly at his hands; their function then was to represent in massive shape precisely the groveling interests which demanded one's contempt, and the only acknowledgment one owed them was for the completeness of the illustration. Everything which, in a great city, could touch the sentient faculty of a youth on whom nothing was lost ministered to his conviction that there was no possible good fortune in life too delicate for him to appreciate — no privilege, no opportunity, no luxury, to which he should not do justice. It was not so much

that he wished to enjoy as that he wished to know; his desire was not to be pampered, but to be initiated. Sometimes, of a Saturday, in the long evenings of June and July, he made his way into Hyde Park at the hour when the throng of carriages, of riders, of brilliant pedestrians, was thickest; and though lately, on two or three of these occasions, he had been accompanied by Miss Henning, whose criticism of the scene was loud and distinct, a tremendous little drama had taken place, privately, in his soul. He wanted to drive in every carriage, to mount on every horse, to feel on his arm the hand of every pretty woman in the place. In the midst of this his sense was vivid that he belonged to the class whom the upper ten thousand, as they passed, didn't so much as rest their eyes upon for a quarter of a second. They looked at Millicent, who was safe to be looked at anywhere, and was one of the handsomest girls in any company, but they only reminded him of the high human walls, the deep gulfs of tradition, the steep embankments of privilege, and dense layers of stupidity which fenced him off from social recognition.

And this was not the fruit of a morbid vanity on his part, or of a jealousy that could not be intelligent; his personal discomfort was the result of an exquisite admiration for what he had missed. There were individuals whom he followed with his eyes, with his thoughts, sometimes even with his steps; they seemed to tell him what it was to be the flower of a high civilization. At moments he was aghast when he reflected that the cause he had secretly espoused, the cause from which M. Poupin and Paul Muniment (especially the latter) had within the last few months' drawn aside the curtain, proposed to itself to bring about a state of things in which that particular scene would be impossible. It made him even rather faint to think that he must choose; that he couldn't (with any respect for his own consistency) work, underground, for the enthronement of the democracy, and continue to enjoy, in however platonic a manner, a spectacle which rested on a hideous social inequality. He must either suffer with the-people, as he had suffered before, or he must apologize to others, as he sometimes came so near doing to himself, for the rich; inasmuch as the day was certainly near when these two mighty forces would come to a death - grapple. Hyacinth thought himself obliged, at present, to have reasons for his feelings; his intimacy with Paul Muniment, which had now grown very great, laid a good deal of that sort of responsibility upon him. Muniment laughed at his reasons, whenever he produced them, but he appeared to expect him, nevertheless, to have them ready, on demand, and Hyacinth had an immense desire to do what he expected. There were times when he said to himself that it might very well be his fate to be divided, to the point of torture, to be split open by sympathies that pulled him in different ways; for hadn't he an extraordinarily mingled current in his blood, and from the time he could remember was there not one half of him that seemed to be always playing tricks on the other, or getting snubs and pinches from it?

That dim, dreadful, confused legend of his mother's history, as regards which what Pinnie had been able to tell him when he first began to question her was at once too much and too little — this stupefying explanation had supplied him, first and last, with a hundred different theories of his identity. What he knew, what he guessed, sickened him, and what he didn't know tormented him; but in his illuminated ignorance he had fashioned forth an article of faith. This had gradually emerged from the depths of darkness in which he found himself plunged as a consequence of the challenge he had addressed to Pinnie — while he was still only a child — on the memorable day which transformed the whole face of his future. It was one January afternoon. He had come in from a walk; she was seated at her lamp, as usual with her work, and she began to tell him of a letter that one of the lodgers had got, describing the manner in which his brotherin-law's shop, at Nottingham, had been rifled by burglars. He listened to her story, standing in front of her, and then, by way of response, he said to her, "Who was that woman you took me to see ever so long ago?" The expression of her white face, as she looked up at him, her fear of such an attack all dormant, after so many years — her strange, scared, sick glance was a thing he could never forget, any more than the tone, with her breath failing her, in which she had repeated, "That woman?"

"That woman, in the prison, years ago — how old was I? — who was dying, and who kissed me so — as I have never been kissed, as I never shall be again!

Who was she, who was she?" Poor Pinnie, to do her justice, had made, after she recovered her breath, a gallant fight: it lasted a week; it was to leave her spent and sore forevermore, and before it was over Theophilus Vetch had been called in. At his instance she retracted the falsehoods with which she had tried to put him off, and she made, at last, a confession, a report, which he had reason to believe was as complete as her knowledge. Hyacinth could never have told you why the crisis occurred on such a day, why his question broke out at that particular moment. The strangeness of the matter to himself was that the germ of his curiosity should have developed so slowly; that the haunting wonder, which now, as he looked back, appeared to fill his whole childhood, should only after so long an interval have crept up to the air. It was only, of course, little by little that he had recovered his bearings in his new and more poignant consciousness; little by little that he reconstructed his antecedents, took the measure, so far as was possible, of his heredity. His having the courage to disinter, in the Times, in the reading-room of the British Museum, a report of his mother's trial for the murder of Lord Frederick Purvis, which was very copious, the affair having been quite a cause celebre; his resolution in sitting under that splendid dome, and, with his head bent to hide his hot eyes, going through every syllable of the ghastly record, had been an achievement of comparatively recent years. There were certain things that Pinnie knew which appalled him; and there were others, as to which he would have given his hand to have some light, that it made his heart ache supremely to find she was honestly ignorant of. He

scarcely knew what sort of favor Mr. Vetch wished to make with him (as a compensation for the precious part he had played in the business years before), when the fiddler permitted himself to pass judgment on the family of the wretched young nobleman for not having provided in some manner for the infant child of his assassin. Why should they have provided, when it was evident that they refused absolutely to recognize his lordship's responsibility? Pinnie had to admit this, under Hyacinth's terrible cross - questioning; she could not pretend, with any show of evidence, that Lord Whiteroy and the other brothers (there had been no less than seven, most of them still living) had, at the time of the trial, given any symptom of believing Florentine Vivier's asseverations. That was their affair; he had long since made up his mind that his own was very different. One couldn't believe at will, and fortunately, in the case, he had no effort to make; for from the moment he began to consider the established facts (few as they were, and poor and hideous) he regarded himself, irresistibly, as the son of the recreant, sacrificial Lord Frederick.

He had no need to reason about it; all his nerves and pulses pleaded and testified. His mother had been a daughter of the wild French people (all that Pinnie could tell him of her parentage was that Florentine had once mentioned that in her extreme childhood her father had fallen, in the bloodstained streets of Paris, on a barricade, with his gun in his hand); but on the other side it took an English aristocrat — though a poor specimen, apparently, had to suffice — to account for him. This, with its further implications, became Hyacinth's article of faith; the reflection that he was a bastard involved in a remarkable manner the reflection that he was a gentleman. He was conscious that he didn't hate the image of his father, as he might have been expected to do; and he supposed this was because Lord Frederick had paid so tremendous a penalty. It was in the exaction of that penalty that the moral proof, for Hyacinth, resided; his mother would not have armed herself on account of any injury less cruel than the episode of which her miserable baby was the living sign. She had avenged herself because she had been thrown over, and the bitterness of that wrong had been in the fact that he, Hyacinth, lay there in her lap. He was the one to have been killed: that remark our young man often made to himself. That his attitude on this whole subject was of a tolerably exalted, transcendent character, and took little account of any refutation that might be based on a vulgar glance at three or four facts, is proved by the importance that he attached, for instance, to the name by which his mother had told poor Pinnie (when this excellent creature consented to take him) that she wished him to be called. Hyacinth had been the name of her father, a republican clockmaker, the martyr of his opinions, whose memory she professed to worship; and when Lord Frederick insinuated himself into her confidence he had reasons for preferring to be known as plain Mr. Robinson — reasons, however, which, in spite of the light thrown upon them at the trial, it was difficult, after so many years, to enter into.

Hyacinth never knew that Mr. Vetch had said more than once to Pinnie, "If her contention as regards that dissolute young swell was true, why didn't she make the child bear his real name, instead of his false one?" — an inquiry which the dressmaker answered with some ingenuity, by remarking that she couldn't call him after a man she had murdered, and that she supposed the unhappy girl didn't wish to publish to every one the boy's connection with a crime that had been so much talked about. If Hyacinth had assisted at this little discussion, it is needless to say that he would have sided with Miss Pynsent; though that his judgment was independently formed is proved by the fact that Pinnie's fearfully indiscreet attempts at condolence should not have made him throw up his version in disgust. It was after the complete revelation that he understood the romantic innuendoes with which his childhood had been surrounded, and of which he had never caught the meaning; they having seemed but part and parcel of the habitual and promiscuous divagations of his too constructive companion. When it came over him that, for years, she had made a fool of him, to himself and to others, he could have beaten her, for grief and shame; and yet, before he administered this rebuke, he had to remember that she only chattered (though she professed to have been extraordinarily dumb) about a matter which he spent nine tenths of his time in brooding over. When she tried to console him for the horror of his mother's history by descanting on the glory of the Purvises, and reminding him that he was related, through them, to half the aristocracy of England, he felt that she was turning the tragedy of his life into a monstrous farce; and yet he none the less continued to cherish the belief that he was a gentleman born. He allowed her to tell him nothing about the family in question, and his stoicism on this subject was one of the reasons of the deep dejection of her later years. If he had only let her brag to him a little about himself, she would have felt that she was making up, by so much, for her grand mistake. He sometimes saw the name of his father's relations in the newspaper, but he always turned away his eyes from it. He had nothing to ask of them, and he wished to prove to himself that he could ignore them (who had been willing to let him die like a rat) as completely as they ignored him. Decidedly, he cried to himself at times, he was with the people, and every possible vengeance of the people, as against such shameless egoism as that; but all the same he was happy to feel that he had blood in his veins that would account for the finest sensibilities.

He had no money to pay for places at a theatre in the Strand; Millicent Henning having made it clear to him that on this occasion she expected something better than the pit. "Should you like the royal box, or a couple of stalls at ten shillings apiece?" he asked of her, with a frankness of irony which, with this young lady, fortunately, it was perfectly possible to practice. She had answered that she would content herself with a seat in the second balcony, in the very front; and as such a position involved an expenditure which he was still unable to meet, he waited one night upon Mr. Vetch, to whom he had already, more than once, had recourse in moments of pecuniary embarrassment. His relations with the caustic fiddler were peculiar; they were much

better in fact than they were in theory. Mr. Vetch had let him know — long before this, and with the purpose of covering Pinnie to the utmost — the part he had played when the question of the child's being taken to Milbank was so distressingly presented; and Hyacinth, in the face of this information, had inquired, with some sublimity, what the devil the fiddler had to do with his private affairs. Theophilus Vetch had replied that it was not as an affair of his, but as an affair of Pinnie's, that he had considered the matter; and Hyacinth afterwards had let the question drop, though he had never been formally reconciled to his officious neighbor. Of course his feeling about him had been immensely modified by the trouble Mr. Vetch had taken to get him a place with old Crookenden; and at the period of which I write it had long been familiar to him that the fiddler didn't care a straw what he thought of his advice at the famous crisis, and entertained himself with watching the career of so curiously concocted a youth. It was impossible to Hyacinth not to perceive that the old man's interest was kindly, and to-day, at any rate, our hero would have declared that nothing could have made up to him for not knowing the truth, horrible as the truth might be. His miserable mother's embrace seemed to furnish him with an inexhaustible fund of motive, and, under the circumstances, that was a benefit. What he chiefly objected to in Theophilus Vetch was a certain air of still regarding him as extremely juvenile; he would have got on with him much better if the fiddler had consented to recognize the degree in which he was already a man of the world. Vetch knew an immense deal about society, and he seemed to know the more because he never swaggered — it was only little by little you discovered it; but that was no reason for his looking as if his chief entertainment resided in a private, humorous commentary on the conversation of his young friend. Hyacinth felt that he himself gave considerable evidence of liking his fellow-resident in Lomax Place when he asked him to lend him half a crown. Somehow, circumstances, of old, had tied them together, and though this partly vexed the little bookbinder, it also touched him; he had more than once solved the problem of deciding how to behave when the fiddler exasperated him by simply asking him some service. The old man had never refused. It was satisfactory to Hyacinth to remember this, as he knocked at his door, very late, after he had allowed him time to come home from the theatre. He knew his habits: Mr. Vetch never went straight to bed, but sat by his fire an hour, smoking his pipe, mixing a grog, and reading some old book. Hyacinth knew when to go up by the light in his window.

"Oh, I know I haven't been to see you for a long time," he said, in response to the remark with which the fiddler greeted him; "and I may as well tell you immediately what has brought me at present — in addition to the desire to ask after your health. I want to take a young lady to the theatre."

Mr. Vetch was habited in a tattered dressing-gown; his apartment smelt strongly of the liquor he was consuming. Divested of his evening-gear, he looked to our hero so bald, so shabby, so flaccid and forlorn, that on the spot Hyacinth ceased to hesitate as to his claims in the event of a social liquidation; he, too, was unmistakably a creditor. "I'm afraid you find your young lady rather expensive."

"I find everything expensive," said Hyacinth, as if to finish that subject.

"Especially, I suppose, your secret societies."

"What do you mean by that?" the young man asked, staring.

"Why, you told me, in the autumn, that you were just about to join a few." "A few? How many do you suppose?" And Hyacinth checked himself. "Do you suppose if I had been serious I would tell?"

"Oh dear, oh dear," Mr. Vetch murmured, with a sigh. Then he went on: "You want to take her to my shop, eh?"

"I'm sorry to say she won't go there. She wants something in the Strand: that's a great point. She wants very much to see the Pearl of Paraguay. I don't wish to pay anything, if possible; I am sorry to say I haven't a penny. But as you know people at the other theatres, and I have heard you say that you do each other little favors, from place to place — a charge de revanche, as the French say — it occurred to me that you might be able to get me an order. The piece has been running a long time, and most people (except poor devils like me) must have seen it: therefore there probably isn't a rush."

Mr. Vetch listened in silence, and presently he said, "Do you want a box?"

"Oh, no; something more modest."

"Why not a box?" asked the fiddler, in a tone which Hyacinth knew.

"Because I haven't got the clothes that people wear in that sort of place, if you must have such a definite reason."

"And your young lady — has she got the clothes?"

"Oh, I dare say; she seems to have everything."

"Where does she get them?"

"Oh, I don't know. She belongs to a big shop; she has to be fine."

"Won't you have a pipe?" Mr. Vetch asked, pushing an old tobacco pouch across the table to his visitor; and while the young man helped himself he puffed a while in silence. "What will she do with you?" he inquired at last.

"What will who do with me?"

"Your big beauty — Miss Henning. I know all about her from Pinnie."

"Then you know what she'll do with me!" Hyacinth returned, with rather a scornful laugh.

"Yes, but, after all, it doesn't very much matter."

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Hyacinth.

“Well, now, the other matter — the International — are you very deep in that?” the fiddler went on, as if he had not heard him.

“Did Pinnie tell you all about that?” his visitor asked.

“No, our friend Eustache has told me a good deal. He knows you have.”

Book Second

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Chapter XII

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HYACINTH AND HIS COMPANION took their seats with extreme promptitude before the curtain rose upon the Pearl of Paraguay. Thanks to Millicent's eagerness not to be late, they encountered the discomfort which had constituted her main objection to going into the pit: they waited for twenty minutes at the door of the theatre, in a tight, stolid crowd, before the official hour of opening. Millicent, bareheaded and very tightly laced, presented a most splendid appearance, and on Hyacinth's part gratified a certain youthful, ingenuous pride of possession in every respect save a tendency, while ingress was denied them, to make her neighbors feel her elbows and to comment, loudly and sarcastically, on the situation. It was more clear to him, even, than it had been before, that she was a young lady who in public places might easily need a champion as an apologist. Hyacinth knew there was only one way to apologize for a "female," when the female was attached very closely and heavily to one's arm, and was reminded afresh how little constitutional aversion Miss Henning had to a row. He had an idea she might think his own taste ran even too little in that direction, and had visions of violent, confused scenes, in which he should in some way distinguish himself: he scarcely knew in what way, and imagined himself more easily routing some hulking adversary by an exquisite application of the retort courteous than by flying at him with a pair of very small fists.

By the time they had reached their places in the balcony Millicent was rather flushed and a good deal ruffled; but she had composed herself in season for the rising of the curtain upon the farce which preceded the melodrama, and which the pair had had no intention of losing. At this stage a more genial agitation took possession of her, and she surrendered her sympathies to the horseplay of the traditional prelude. Hyacinth found it less amusing, but the theatre, in any conditions, was full of sweet deception for him. His imagination projected itself lovingly across the footlights, gilded and colored the shabby canvas and battered accessories, and lost itself so effectually in the fiction world that the end of the play, however long, or however short, brought with it a kind of alarm, like a stoppage of. his personal life. It was impossible to be more friendly to the dramatic illusion. Millicent, as the audience thickened, rejoiced more largely and loudly, held herself as a lady, surveyed the place as if she knew all about it, leaned back and leaned forward, fanned herself with majesty, gave her opinion upon the appearance and coiffure of every woman within sight, abounded in question and conjecture, and produced, from her pocket, a little paper of peppermint-drops, of which, under cruel threats, she compelled Hyacinth to partake. She followed with attention, though not always with success, the complicated adventures of the Pearl of Paraguay, through scenes luxuriantly tropical, in which the male characters wore sombreros and stilettos, and the ladies either danced the cachucha or fled from licentious pursuit; but her eyes wandered, during considerable periods, to the occupants of the boxes and stalls, concerning several of whom she had theories which she imparted to Hyacinth while the play went on, greatly to his discomfiture, he being unable to conceive of such levity. She had the pretension of knowing who every one was; not individually and by name, but as regards their exact social station, the quarter of London in which they lived, and the amount of money they were prepared to spend in the Buckingham Palace Road. She had seen the whole town pass through her establishment there, and though Hyacinth, from his infancy, had been watching it from his own point of view, his companion made him feel that he had missed a thousand characteristic points, so different were most of her interpretations from his, and so very bold and irreverent. Miss Henning's observation of human society had not been of a nature to impress her with its high moral tone, and she had a free, offhand cynicism which imposed itself. She thought most ladies were hypocrites, and had, in all ways, a low opinion of her own sex, which, more than once, before this, she had justified to Hyacinth by narrating observations of the most surprising kind, gathered during her career as a shopgirl. There was a pleasing inconsequence, therefore, in her being moved to tears in the third act of the play, when the Pearl of Paraguay, disheveled and distracted, dragging herself on her knees, implored the stern hidalgo, her father, to believe in her innocence in spite of the circumstances which seemed to condemn her — a midnight meeting with the wicked hero in the grove of coconuts. It was at this crisis, none the less, that she asked Hyacinth who his friends were in the principal box on the left of the stage, and let him know that a gentleman seated there had been watching him, at intervals, for the past half hour.

"Watching me! I like that!" said the young man. "When I want to be watched I take you with me."

"Of course he has looked at me," Millicent answered, as if she had no interest in denying that. "But you 're the one he wants to get hold of."

"To get hold of!"

"Yes, you ninny: don't hang back. He may make your fortune."

"Well, if you would like him to come and sit by you, I'll go and take a walk in the Strand," said Hyacinth,

entering into the humor of the occasion, but not seeing, from where he was placed, any gentleman in the box. Millicent explained that the mysterious observer had just altered his position; he had gone into the back of the box, which had considerable depth. There were other persons in it, out of sight (she and Hyacinth were too much on the same side). One of them was a lady, concealed by the curtain; her arm, bare, and covered with bracelets, was visible at moments on the cushioned ledge. Hyacinth saw it, in effect, reappear there, and even while the play went on contemplated it with a certain interest; but until the curtain fell at the end of the act there was no further symptom that a gentleman wished to get hold of him.

"Now do you say it's me he's after?" Millicent asked abruptly, making him feel her elbow, as the fiddlers in the orchestra began to scrape their instruments for the interlude.

"Of course; I am only the pretext," Hyacinth replied, after he had looked a moment, in a manner which, he flattered himself, was a proof of quick self-possession. The gentleman designated by his companion was once more at the front, leaning forward, with his arms on the edge. Hyacinth saw that he was looking straight at him, and our young man returned his gaze — an effort not rendered the more easy by the fact that, after an instant, he recognized him.

"Well, if he knows us he might give some sign, and if he doesn't he might leave us alone," Millicent declared, abandoning the distinction she had made between herself and her companion. She had no sooner spoken than the gentleman complied with the first-mentioned of these conditions; he smiled at Hyacinth across the house — he nodded to him with unmistakable friendliness. Millicent, perceiving this, glanced at the young man from Lomax Place, and saw that the demonstration had brought a deep color to his cheek. He was blushing, flushing; whether with pleasure or embarrassment was not immediately apparent to her. "I say, I say — is it one of your grand relations?" she promptly exclaimed. "Well, I can stare as well as him;" and she told Hyacinth it was a "shime" to bring a young lady to the play when you hadn't so much as an opera-glass for her to look at the company. "Is he one of those lords your aunt was always talking about, in the Place? Is he your uncle, or your grandfather, or your first or second cousin? No, he's too young for your grandfather. What a pity I can't see if he looks like you!"

At any other time Hyacinth would have thought these inquiries in the worst possible taste, but now he was too much given up to other reflections. It pleased him that the gentleman in the box should recognize and notice him, because even so small a fact as this was an extension of his social existence; but it also surprised and puzzled him, and it produced, generally, in his easily excited organism, an agitation of which, in spite of his attempted self-control, the appearance he presented to Millicent was the sign. They had met three times, he and his fellow-spectator; but they had met under circumstances which, to Hyacinth's mind, would have made a furtive wink, a mere tremor of the eyelid, a more judicious reference to the fact than so public a salutation. Hyacinth would never have permitted himself to greet him first; and this was not because the gentleman in the box belonged — conspicuously as he did so — to a different walk of society. He was apparently a man of forty, tall and lean and loose-jointed; he fell into lounging, dawdling attitudes, and even at a distance he looked lazy. He had a long, smooth, amused, contented face, unadorned with mustache or whisker, and his brown hair parted itself evenly over his forehead, and came forward on either temple in a rich, well-brushed lock which gave his countenance a certain analogy to portraits of English gentlemen about the year 1820. Millicent Henning had a glance of such range and keenness that she was able to make out the details of his evening dress, of which she appreciated the "form;" to observe the character of his large hands; and to note that he appeared to be perpetually smiling, that his eyes were extraordinarily light in color, and that, in spite of the dark, well-marked brows arching over them, his fine skin never had produced, and never would produce, a beard. Our young lady pronounced him, mentally, a "swell" of the first magnitude, and wondered more than ever where he had picked up Hyacinth. Her companion seemed to echo her thought when he exclaimed, with a little surprised sigh, almost an exhalation of awe, "Well, I had no idea he was one of that lot!"

"You might at least tell me his name, so that I shall know what to call him when he comes round to speak to us," the girl said, provoked at her companion's incommunicativeness.

"Comes round to speak to us — a chap like that!" Hyacinth exclaimed.

"Well, I'm sure if he had been your own brother he couldn't have grinned at you more! He may want to make my acquaintance, after all; he won't be the first."

The gentleman had once more retreated from sight, and there was as much evidence as that of the intention Millicent attributed to him. "I don't think I'm at all clear that I've a right to tell his name," he remarked, with sincerity, but with considerable Disposition at the same time to magnify an incident which deepened the brilliancy of the entertainment he had been able to offer Miss Henning. "I met him in a place where he may not like to have it known that he goes."

"Do you go to places that people are ashamed of? Is it one of your political clubs, as you call them, where that dirty young man from Lambeth, Mr. Monument (what do you call him?), fills your head with ideas that'll bring you to no good? I'm sure your friend over there doesn't look as if he 'd be on your side."

Hyacinth had indulged in this reflection himself; but the only answer he made to Millicent was, "Well, then, perhaps he'll be on yours!"

"Laws, I hope she ain't one of the aristocracy!" Millicent exclaimed, with apparent irrelevance; and, following the direction of her eyes, Hyacinth saw that the chair his mysterious acquaintance had quitted in the stage-box was now occupied by a lady hitherto invisible — not the one who had given them a glimpse of her

shoulder and bare arm.

This was an ancient personage, muffled in a voluminous, crumpled white shawl — a stout, odd, foreign-looking woman, whose head was apparently surmounted with a light-colored wig. She had a placid, patient air and a round, wrinkled face, in which, however, a small, bright eye moved quickly enough. Her rather soiled white gloves were too large for her, and round her head, horizontally, arranged as if to keep her wig in its place, she wore a narrow band of tinsel, decorated, in the middle of the forehead, by a jewel which the rest of her appearance would lead the spectator to suppose false. “Is the old woman his mother? Where did she dig up her clothes? They look as if she had hired them for the evening. Does she come to your wonderful club, too? She must throw a great deal of light!” Millicent went on; and when Hyacinth suggested, sportively, that the old lady might be, not the gentleman’s mother, but his wife or his “fancy,” she declared that in that case, if he should come to see them, she wasn’t afraid. No wonder he wanted to get out of that box! The woman in the wig was sitting there on purpose to look at them, but she couldn’t say she was particularly honored by the notice of such an old guy. Hyacinth pretended that he liked her appearance and thought her very handsome; he offered to bet another paper of peppermints that, if they could find out, she would be some tremendous old dowager, some one with a handle to her name. To this Millicent replied, with an air of experience, that she had never thought the greatest beauty was in the upper class; and her companion could see that she was covertly looking over her shoulder, to watch for his political friend, and that she would be disappointed if he did not come. This idea did not make Hyacinth jealous, for his mind was occupied with another side of the business; and if he offered sportive suggestions, it was because he was really excited, dazzled, by an incident of which the reader will have failed as yet to perceive the larger relation. What moved him was not the pleasure of being patronized by a rich man; it was simply the prospect of new experience — a sensation for which he was always ready to exchange any present boon; and he was convinced that if the gentleman with whom he had conversed in a small, occult back-room in Bloomsbury as Captain Godfrey Sholto — the captain had given him his card — had more positively than in Millicent’s imagination come out of the stage-box to see him, he would bring with him rare influences. This nervous presentiment, lighting on our young man, was so keen that it constituted almost a preparation; therefore, when at the end of a few minutes he became aware that Millicent, with her head turned (her face was in his direction), was taking the measure of some one who had come in behind them, he felt that fate was doing for him, by way of a change, as much as could be expected. He got up in his place, but not too soon to see that Captain Sholto had been standing there a moment in contemplation of Millicent, and that this young lady had performed with deliberation the ceremony of taking his measure. The captain had his hands in his pockets, and wore a crush hat, pushed a good deal backward. He laughed at the young couple in the balcony in the friendliest way, as if he had known them both for years, and Millicent could see, on a nearer view, that he was a fine, distinguished, easy, genial gentleman, at least six feet high, in spite of a habit, or an affectation, of carrying himself in a casual, relaxed, familiar manner. Hyacinth felt a little, after the first moment, as if he were treating them rather too much as a pair of children whom he had stolen upon, to startle; but this impression was speedily removed by the air with which he said, laying his hand on our hero’s shoulder as he stood in the little passage at the end of the bench, where the holders of Mr. Vetch’s order occupied the first seats, “My dear fellow, I really thought I must come round and speak to you. My spirits are all gone with this doleful drama. And those boxes are fearfully stuffy, you know,” he added, as if Hyacinth had had at least an equal experience of that part of the theatre.

“It’s hot here, too,” Millicent’s companion murmured. He had suddenly become much more conscious of the high temperature, of his proximity to the fierce chandelier, and he added that the plot of the play certainly was unnatural, though he thought the piece rather well acted.

“Oh, it’s the good old stodgy British tradition. This is the only place where you find it still, and even here it can’t last much longer; it can’t survive old Baskerville and Mrs. Ruffler. ‘Gad, how old they are! I remember her, long past her prime, when I used to be taken to the play, as a boy, in the Christmas holidays. Between them, they must be something like a hundred and eighty, eh? I believe one is supposed to cry a good deal, about the middle,” Captain Sholto continued, in the same friendly, familiar, encouraging way, addressing himself to Millicent, upon whom, indeed, his eyes had rested almost uninterruptedly from the first. She sustained his glance with composure, but with just enough of an expression of reserve to intimate (what was perfectly true) that she was not in the habit of conversing with gentlemen with whom she was not acquainted. She turned away her face at this (she had already given the visitor the benefit of a good deal of it), and left him, as in the little passage he leaned against the parapet of the balcony with his back to the stage, confronted with Hyacinth, who was now wondering, with rather more vivid a sense of the relation of things, what he had come for. He wanted to do him honor, in return for his civility, but he did not know what one could talk about, at such short notice, to a person whom he immediately perceived to be, in a most extensive, a really transcendent sense of the term, a man of the world. He instantly saw Captain Sholto did not take the play seriously, so that he felt himself warned off that topic, on which, otherwise, he might have had much to say. On the other hand, he could not, in the presence of a third person, allude to the matters they had discussed in that little back room; nor could he suppose his visitor would expect this, though indeed he impressed him as a man of humors and whims, who was amusing himself with everything, including esoteric socialism and a little bookbinder who had so much more of the gentleman about him than one would expect. Captain Sholto may have been a little embarrassed, now that he was completely launched in his attempt at fraternization,

especially after failing to elicit a smile from Millicent's respectability; but he left to Hyacinth the burden of no initiative, and went on to say that it was just this prospect of the dying-out of the old British tradition that had brought him tonight. He was with a friend, a lady who had lived much abroad, who had never seen anything of the kind, and who liked everything that was characteristic. "You know the foreign school of acting is a very different affair," he said, again to Millicent, who this time replied, "Oh, yes, of course," and, considering afresh the old lady in the box, reflected that she looked as if there were nothing in the world that she, at least, hadn't seen.

"We have never been abroad," said Hyacinth, candidly, looking into his friend's curious light-colored eyes, the palest in tint he had ever seen.

"Oh, well, there's a lot of nonsense talked about that!" Captain Sholto replied; while Hyacinth remained uncertain as to exactly what he referred to, and Millicent decided to volunteer a remark: —

"They are making a tremendous row on the stage. I should think it would be very bad in those boxes." There was a banging and thumping behind the curtain, the sound of heavy scenery pushed about.

"Oh, yes; it's much better here, every way. I think you have the best seats in the house," said Captain Sholto. "I should like very much to finish my evening beside you. The trouble is I have ladies — a pair of them," he went on, as if he were seriously considering this possibility. Then, laying his hand again on Hyacinth's shoulder, he smiled at him a moment and indulged in a still greater burst of frankness: "My dear fellow, that is just what, as a partial reason, has brought me up here to see you. One of my ladies has a great desire to make your acquaintance!"

"To make my acquaintance?" Hyacinth felt himself turning pale; the first impulse he could have, in connection with such an announcement as that — and it lay far down, in the depths of the unspeakable — was a conjecture that it had something to do with his parentage on his father's side. Captain Sholto's smooth, bright face, irradiating such unexpected advances, seemed for an instant to swim before him. The captain went on to say that he had told the lady of the talks they had had, that she was immensely interested in such matters— "You know what I mean, she really is" — and that, as a consequence of what he had said, she had begged him to come and ask his — a — his young friend (Hyacinth saw in a moment that the captain had forgotten his name) to descend into her box for a little while.

"She has a tremendous desire to talk with some one who looks at the whole business from your standpoint, don't you see? And in her position she scarcely ever has a chance, she doesn't come across them — to her great annoyance. So when I spotted you tonight, she immediately said that I must introduce you at any cost. I hope you don't mind, for a quarter of an hour. I ought perhaps to tell you that she is a person who is used to having nothing refused her. 'Go up and bring him down,' you know, as if it were the simplest thing in the world. She is really very much in earnest: I don't mean about wishing to see you — that goes without saying — but about the whole matter that you and I care for. Then I should add — it doesn't spoil anything — that she is the most charming woman in the world, simply! Honestly, my dear boy, she is one of the most remarkable women in Europe."

So Captain Sholto delivered himself, with the highest naturalness and plausibility, and Hyacinth, listening, felt that he himself ought perhaps to resent the idea of being served up for the entertainment of imperious triflers, but that somehow he didn't, and that it was more worthy of the part he aspired to play in life to meet such occasions calmly and urbanely, than to take the trouble of dodging and going roundabout. Of course the lady in the box couldn't be sincere; she might think she was, though even that was questionable; but you couldn't really care for the cause that was exemplified in the little back room in Bloomsbury if you came to the theatre in that style. It was Captain Sholto's style as well, but it had been by no means clear to Hyacinth hitherto that Tie really cared. All the same, this was no time for going into the question of the lady's sincerity, and at the end of sixty seconds our young man had made up his mind that he could afford to humor her. None the less, I must add, the whole proposal continued to make things dance, to appear fictive, delusive; so that it sounded, in comparison, like a note of reality when Millicent, who had been looking from one of the men to the other, exclaimed —

"That's all very well, but who is to look after me?" Her assumption of the majestic had broken down, and this was the cry of nature.

Nothing could have been pleasanter and more indulgent of her alarm than the manner in which Captain Sholto reassured her: "My dear young lady, can you suppose I have been unmindful of that? I have been hoping that after I have taken down our friend and introduced him you would allow me to come back and, in his absence, occupy his seat."

Hyacinth was preoccupied with the idea of meeting the most remarkable woman in Europe; but at this juncture he looked at Millicent Henning with some curiosity. She rose to the situation, and replied, "I am much obliged to you, but I don't know who you are."

"Oh, I'll tell you all about that!" the captain exclaimed benevolently.

"Of course I should introduce you," said Hyacinth, and he mentioned to Miss Henning the name of his distinguished acquaintance.

"In the army?" the young lady inquired, as if she must have every guarantee of social position.

"Yes — not in the navy! I have left the army, but it always sticks to one."

"Mr. Robinson, is it your intention to leave me?" Millicent asked in a tone of the highest propriety.

Hyacinth's imagination had taken such a flight that the idea of what he owed to the beautiful girl who had placed herself under his care for the evening had somehow effaced itself. Her words put it before him in a manner that threw him quickly and consciously back upon his honor; yet there was something in the way she uttered them that made him look at her harder still before he replied, "Oh dear, no, of course it would never do. I must defer to some other occasion the honor of making the acquaintance of your friend," he added, to Captain Sholto.

"Ah, my dear fellow, we might manage it so easily now," this gentleman murmured, with evident disappointment. "It is not as if Miss — a — Miss — a — were to be alone."

It flashed upon Hyacinth that the root of the project might be a desire of Captain Sholto to insinuate himself into Millicent's graces; then he asked himself why the most remarkable woman in Europe should lend herself to that design, consenting even to receive a visit from a little bookbinder for the sake of furthering it. Perhaps, after all, she was not the most remarkable; still, even at a lower estimate, of what advantage could such a complication be to her? To Hyacinth's surprise, Millicent's eye made acknowledgment of his implied renunciation; and she said to Captain Sholto, as if she were considering the matter very impartially, "Might one know the name of the lady that sent you?"

"The Princess Casamassima."

"Laws!" cried Millicent Henning. And then, quickly, as if to cover up the crudity of this ejaculation, "And might one also know what it is, as you say, that she wants to talk to him about?"

"About the lower order, the rising democracy, the spread of nihilism, and all that."

"The lower order? Does she think we belong to them?" the girl demanded, with a strange, provoking laugh.

Captain Sholto was certainly the readiest of men. "If she could see you, she would think you one of the first ladies in the land."

"She "11 never see me!" Millicent replied, in a manner which made it plain that she, at least, was not to be whistled for.

Being whistled for by a princess presented itself to Hyacinth as an indignity endured gracefully enough by the heroes of several French novels in which he had found a thrilling interest; nevertheless, he said, incorruptibly, to the captain, who hovered there like a Mephistopheles converted to disinterested charity, "Having been in the army, you will know that one can't desert one's post."

The captain, for the third time, laid his hand on his young friend's shoulder, and for a minute his smile rested, in silence, on Millicent Henning. "If I tell you simply I want to talk with this young lady, that certainly won't help me, particularly, and there is no reason why it should. Therefore I'll tell you the whole truth: I want to talk with her about you!" and he patted Hyacinth in a way which conveyed at once that this idea must surely commend him to the young man's companion, and that he himself liked him infinitely.

Hyacinth was conscious of the endearment, but he remarked to Millicent that he would do just as she liked; he was determined not to let a member of the bloated upper class suppose that he held any daughter of the people cheap.

"Oh, I don't care if you go," said Miss Henning. "You had better hurry — the curtain's going to rise."

"That's charming of you! I'll rejoin you in three minutes!" Captain Sholto exclaimed.

He passed his hand into Hyacinth's arm, and as our hero lingered still, a little uneasy and questioning Millicent always with his eyes, the girl went on, with her bright boldness, "That kind of princess — I should like to hear all about her."

"Oh, I'll tell you that, too," the captain rejoined, with his imperturbable pleasantness, as he led his young friend away. It must be confessed that Hyacinth also rather wondered what kind of princess she was, and his suspense on this point made his heart beat fast when, after traversing steep staircases and winding corridors, they reached the small door of the stage-box.

Chapter XIII

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HYACINTH'S FIRST CONSCIOUSNESS, after his companion had opened it, was of his nearness to the stage, on which the curtain had now risen again. The play was in progress, the actors' voices came straight into the box, and it was impossible to speak without disturbing them. This, at least, was his inference from the noiseless way his conductor drew him in, and, without announcing or introducing him, simply pointed to a chair and whispered, "Just drop into that; you'll see and hear beautifully." He heard the door close behind him, and became aware that Captain Sholto had already retreated. Millicent, at any rate, would not be left to languish in solitude very long. Two ladies were seated in the front of the box, which was so large that there was a considerable space between them; and as he stood there, where Captain Sholto had planted him — they appeared not to have noticed the opening of the door — they turned their heads and looked at him. The one on whom his eyes first rested was the old lady whom he had already contemplated at a distance; she looked queerer still on a closer view, and gave him a little friendly, jolly nod. The other one was partly overshadowed by the curtain of the box, which she had drawn forward with the intention of shielding herself from the

observation of the house; she was young, and the simplest way to express the instant effect upon Hyacinth of her fair face of welcome is to say that she was dazzling. He remained as Sholto had left him, staring rather confusedly and not moving an inch; whereupon the younger lady put out her hand, — it was her left, the other rested on the ledge of the box — with the expectation, as he perceived, to his extreme mortification, too late, that he would give her his own. She converted the gesture into a sign of invitation, and beckoned him, silently but graciously, to move his chair forward. He did so, and seated himself between the two ladies; then, for ten minutes, stared straight before him, at the stage, not turning his eyes sufficiently even to glance up at Millicent in the balcony. He looked at the play, but he was far from seeing it; he had no sense of anything but the woman who sat there, close to him, on his right, with a fragrance in her garments and a light about her which he seemed to see even while his head was averted. The vision had been only of a moment, but it hung before him, threw a vague white mist over the proceedings on the stage. He was embarrassed, overturned, bewildered, and he knew it; he made a great effort to collect himself, to consider the situation lucidly. He wondered whether he ought to speak, to look at her again, to behave differently, in some way; whether she would take him for a clown, for an idiot; whether she were really as beautiful as she had seemed, or if it were only an accidental glamour, which would vanish. While he asked himself these questions the minutes went on, and neither of his companions spoke; they watched the play in perfect stillness, so that Hyacinth divined that this was the proper thing, and that he himself must remain dumb until a word should be bestowed upon him. Little by little he recovered himself, took possession of his predicament, and at last transferred his eyes to the Princess. She immediately perceived this, and returned his glance, with a, quick smile. She might well be a princess — it was impossible to conform more to the finest evocations of that romantic word. She was fair, brilliant, slender, with a kind of languor. Her beauty had a character of perfection; it astonished and lifted one up, and the sight of it seemed a reward. If the first impression it had given Hyacinth was to make him feel strangely privileged, he need not have been too much agitated, for this was the effect the Princess Casamassima produced upon persons of a wider experience and greater pretensions. Her dark eyes, blue or gray, something that was not brown, were as sweet as they were splendid, and there was an extraordinary light nobleness in the way she held her head. That head, where two or three diamond stars glittered in the thick, delicate hair which defined its shape, suggested to Hyacinth something antique and celebrated, which he had admired of old — the memory was vague — in a statue, in a picture, in a museum. Purity of line and form, of cheek and chin and lip and brow, a color that seemed to live and glow, a radiance of youth and eminence and success — these things were seated in triumph in the face of the Princess, and Hyacinth, as he held himself in his chair, trembling with the revelation, wondered whether he were not in the company of a goddess. A goddess she might be, but he could see that she was human and friendly — that she wished him to be at his ease and happy; there was something familiar in her smile, as if she had seen him many times before. Her dress was dark and rich; she had pearls round her neck, and an old rococo fan in her hand. Hyacinth took in all these things, and finally said to himself that if she wanted nothing more of him than that, he was content, he would like it to go on; so pleasant was it to sit with fine ladies, in a dusky, spacious receptacle which framed the bright picture of the stage, and made one's own situation seem a play within the play. The act was a long one, and the repose in which his companions left him might have been a calculated indulgence, to enable him to get used to them, to see how harmless they were. He looked at Millicent, in the course of time, and saw that Captain Sholto, seated beside her, had not the same standard of propriety, inasmuch as he made a remark to her every few minutes. Like himself, the young lady in the balcony was losing the play, thanks to her eyes being fixed on her friend from Lomax Place, whose position she thus endeavored to gauge. Hyacinth had quite given up the Paraguayan complications; by the end of the half hour his attention might have come back to them, had he not then been engaged in wondering what the Princess would say to him after the descent of the curtain — or whether she would say anything. The consideration of this problem, as the moment of the solution drew nearer, made his heart again beat faster. He watched the old lady on his left, and supposed it was natural that a princess should have an attendant — he took for granted she was an attendant — as different as possible from herself. This ancient dame was without majesty or grace; huddled together, with her hands folded on her stomach and her lips protruding, she solemnly followed the performance. Several times, however, she turned her head to Hyacinth, and then her expression changed; she repeated the jovial, encouraging, almost motherly nod with which she had greeted him when he made his bow, and by which she appeared to wish to intimate that, better than the serene beauty on the other side, she could enter into the oddity, the discomfort, of his situation. She seemed to say to him that he must keep his head, and that if the worst should come to the worst, she was there to look after him. Even when, at last, the curtain descended, it was some moments before the Princess spoke, though she rested her smile upon Hyacinth as if she were considering what he would best like her to say. He might at that instant have guessed what he discovered later — that among this lady's faults (he was destined to learn that they were numerous) not the least eminent was an exaggerated fear of the commonplace. He expected she would make some remark about the play, but what she said was, very gently and kindly, "I like to know all sorts of people."

"I shouldn't think you would find the least difficulty in that," Hyacinth replied.

"Oh, if one wants anything very much, it's sure to be difficult. Every one isn't as obliging as you."

Hyacinth could think, immediately, of no proper rejoinder to this; but the old lady saved him the trouble by declaring, with a foreign accent, "I think you were most extraordinarily goodnatured. I had no idea you would

come — to two strange women."

"Yes, we are strange women," said the Princess, musingly.

"It's not true that she finds things difficult; she makes every one do everything," her companion went on.

The Princess glanced at her; then remarked to Hyacinth, "Her name is Madame Grandoni." Her tone was not familiar, bat there was a friendly softness in it, as if he had really taken so much trouble for them that it was only just he should be entertained a little at their expense. It seemed to imply, also, that Madame Grandoni's fitness for supplying such entertainment was obvious.

"But I am not Italian — ah, no!" the old lady cried. "In spite of my name, I am an honest, ugly, unfortunate German. But it doesn't matter. She also, with such a name, isn't Italian, either. It's an accident; the world is full of accidents. But she isn't German, poor lady, any more." Madame Grandoni appeared to have entered into the Princess's view, and Hyacinth thought her exceedingly amusing. In a moment she added, "That was a very charming person you were with."

"Yes, she is very charming," Hyacinth replied, not sorry to have a chance to say it.

The Princess made no remark on this subject, and Hyacinth perceived not only that from her position in the box she could have had no glimpse of Millicent, but that she would never take up such an allusion as that. It was as if she had not heard it that she asked, "Do you consider the play very interesting?"

Hyacinth hesitated a moment, and then told the simple truth. "I must confess that I have lost the whole of this last act."

"Ah, poor, bothered young man!" cried Madame Grandoni. "You see — you see!"

"What do I see?" the Princess inquired. "If you are annoyed at being here now, you will like us later; probably, at least. We take a great interest in the things you care for. We take a great interest in the people," the Princess went on.

"Oh, allow me, allow me, and speak only for yourself!" the elder lady interposed. "I take no interest in the people; I don't understand them, and I know nothing about them. An honorable nature, of any class, I always respect it; but I will not pretend to a passion for the ignorant masses, because I have it not. Moreover, that doesn't touch the gentleman."

The Princess Casamassima had, evidently, a faculty of completely ignoring things of which she wished to take no account; it was not in the least the air of contempt, but a kind of thoughtful, tranquil absence, after which she came back to the point where she wished to be. She made no protest against her companion's speech, but said to Hyacinth as if she were only vaguely conscious that the old lady had been committing herself in some absurd way, "She lives with me; she is everything to me; she is the best woman in the world."

"Yes, fortunately, with very superficial defects, I am very good," Madame Grandoni remarked.

Hyacinth, by this time, was less fluttered than when he presented himself to the Princess Casamassima, but he was not less mystified; he wondered afresh whether he were not being practiced upon for some inconceivable end; so strange did it seem to him that two such fine ladies should, of their own movement, take the trouble to explain each other to a miserable little bookbinder. This idea made him flush; it was as if it had come over him that he had fallen into a trap. He was conscious that he looked frightened, and he was conscious the moment afterwards that the Princess noticed it. This was, apparently, what made her say, "If you have lost so much of the play I ought to tell you what has happened."

"Do you think he would follow that any more?" Madame Grandoni exclaimed.

"If you would tell me — if you would tell me" — And then Hyacinth stopped. He. had been going to say, "If you would tell me what all this means and what you want of me, it would be more to the point!" but the words died on his lips, and he sat staring, for the woman at his right was simply too beautiful. She was too beautiful to question, to judge by common logic; and how could he know, moreover, what was natural to a person in that exaltation of grace and splendor? Perhaps it was her habit to send out every evening for some naif stranger, to amuse her; perhaps that was the way the foreign aristocracy lived. There was no sharpness in her face, at the present moment at least; there was nothing but luminous sweetness, yet she looked as if she knew what was going on in his mind. She made no eager attempt to reassure him, but there was a world of delicate consideration in the tone in which she said, "Do you know, I am afraid I have already forgotten what they have been doing in the play? It's terribly complicated; some one or other was hurled over a precipice."

"Ah, you 're a brilliant pair," Madame Grandoni remarked,' with a laugh of long experience. "I could describe everything. The person who was hurled over the precipice was the virtuous hero, and you will see, in the next act, that he was only slightly bruised."

"Don't describe anything; I have so much to ask." Hyacinth had looked away, with embarrassment, at hearing himself "paired" with the Princess, and he felt that she was watching him. "What do you think of Captain Sholto?" she went on, suddenly, to his surprise, if anything, in his position, could excite that sentiment more than anything else; and as he hesitated, not knowing what to say, she added, "Isn't he a very curious type?"

"I know him very little," Hyacinth replied; and he had no sooner uttered the words than it struck him they were far from brilliant — they were poor and flat, and very little calculated to satisfy the Princess. Indeed, he reflected that he had said nothing at all that could place him in a favorable light; so he continued, at a venture: "I mean, I have never seen him at home." That sounded still more silly.

"At home? Oh, he is never at home; he is all over the world. Tonight he was as likely to have been in

Paraguay, for instance, as here. He is what they call a cosmopolite. I don't know whether you know that species; very modern, more and more frequent, and exceedingly tiresome. I prefer the Chinese! He told me he had had a great deal of interesting talk with you. That was what made me say to him, 'Oh, do ask him to come in and see me. A little interesting talk, that would be a change!' "

"She is very complimentary to me!" said Madame Grandoni.

"Ah, my dear, you and I, you know, we never talk: we understand each other without that!" Then the Princess pursued, addressing herself to Hyacinth, "Do you never admit women?"

"Admit women?"

"Into those seances — what do you call them? — those little meetings that Captain Sholto described to me. I should like so much to be present. Why not?"

"I haven't seen any ladies," Hyacinth said. "I don't know whether it's a rule, but I have seen nothing but men;" and he added, smiling, though he thought the dereliction rather serious, and couldn't understand the part Captain Sholto was playing, nor, considering the grand company he kept, how he had originally secured admittance into the subversive little circle in Bloomsbury, "You know I'm not sure Captain Sholto ought to go about reporting our proceedings."

"I see. Perhaps you think he's a spy, or something of that sort."

"No," said Hyacinth, after a moment. "I think a spy would be more careful — would disguise himself more. Besides, after all, he has heard very little." And Hyacinth smiled again.

"You mean he hasn't really been behind the scenes?" the Princess asked, bending forward a little, and now covering the young man steadily with her deep, soft eyes, as if by this time he must have got used to her and wouldn't flinch from such attention. "Of course he hasn't, and he never will be; he knows that, and that it's quite out of his power to tell any real secrets. What he repeated to me was interesting, but of course I could see that there was nothing any government could put its hand on. It was mainly the talk he had had with you which struck him so very much, and which struck me, as you see. Perhaps you didn't know how he was drawing you out."

"I am afraid that's rather easy," said Hyacinth, with perfect candor, as it came over him that he had chattered, with a vengeance, in Bloomsbury, and had thought it natural enough then that his sociable fellow-visitor should offer him cigars and attach importance to the views of a clever and original young artisan.

"I am not sure that I find it so! However, I ought to tell you that you needn't have the least fear of Captain Sholto. He's a perfectly honest man, so far as he goes; and even if you had trusted him much more than you appear to have done, he would be incapable of betraying you. However, don't trust him: not because he's not safe, but because — No matter, you will see for yourself. He has gone into that sort of thing simply to please me. I should tell you, merely to make you understand, that he would do anything for that. That's his own affair. I wanted to know something, to learn something, to ascertain what really is going on; and for a woman everything of that sort is so difficult, especially for a woman in my position, who is known, and to whom every sort of bad faith is sure to be imputed. So Sholto said he would look into the subject for me; poor man, he has had to look into so many subjects! What I particularly wanted was that he should make friends with some of the leading spirits, really characteristic types." The Princess's voice was low and rather deep, and her tone very quick; her manner of speaking was altogether new to her listener, for whom the pronunciation of her words and the very punctuation of her sentences were a kind of revelation of "society."

"Surely, Captain Sholto doesn't suppose that I am a leading spirit!" Hyacinth exclaimed, with the determination not to be laughed at any more than he could help.

The Princess hesitated a moment; then she said, "He told me you were very original."

"He doesn't know, and — if you will allow me to say so — I don't think you know. How should you? I am one of many thousands of young men of my class — you know, I suppose, what that is — in whose brains certain ideas are fermenting. There is nothing original about me at all. I am very young and very ignorant; it's only a few months since I began to talk of the possibility of a social revolution with men who have considered the whole ground much more than I have done. I'm a mere particle in the immensity of the people. All I pretend to is my good faith, and a great desire that justice shall be done."

The Princess listened to him intently, and her attitude made him feel how little he, in comparison, expressed himself like a person who had the habit of conversation; he seemed to himself to stammer and emit common sounds. For a moment she said nothing, only looking at him with her pure smile. "I do draw you out!" she exclaimed, at last. "You are much more interesting to me than if you were an exception." At these last words Hyacinth flinched a hair's breadth; the movement was shown by his dropping his eyes. We know to what extent he really regarded himself as of the stuff of the common herd. The Princess doubtless guessed it as well, for she quickly added, "At the same time, I can see that you are remarkable enough."

"What do you think I am remarkable for?"

"Well, you have general ideas."

"Every one has them to-day. They have them in Bloomsbury to a terrible degree. I have a friend (who understands the matter much better than I) who has no patience with them: he declares they are our danger and our bane. A few very special ideas — if they are the right ones — are what we want."

"Who is your friend?" the Princess asked, abruptly.

"Ah, Christina, Christina," Madame Grandoni murmured from the other side of the box.

Christina took no notice of her, and Hyacinth, not understanding the warning, and only remembering how personal women always are, replied, “A young man who lives in Lambeth, an assistant at a wholesale chemist’s.”

If he had expected that this description of his friend was a bigger dose than his hostess would be able to digest, he was greatly mistaken. She seemed to look tenderly at the picture suggested by his words, and she immediately inquired whether the young man were also clever, and whether she might not hope to know him. Hadn’t Captain Sholto seen him; and if so, why hadn’t he spoken of him, too? When Hyacinth had replied that Captain Sholto had probably seen him, but that he believed he had had no particular conversation with him, the Princess inquired, with startling frankness, whether her visitor wouldn’t bring his friend, some day, to see her.

Hyacinth glanced at Madame Grandoni, but that worthy woman was engaged in a survey of the house, through an old-fashioned eyeglass with a long gilt handle. He had perceived, long before this, that the Princess Casamassima had no desire for vain phrases, and he had the good taste to feel that, from himself to such a personage, compliments, even if he had wished to pay them, would have had no suitability. “I don’t know whether he would be willing to come. He’s the sort of man that, in such a case, you can’t answer for.”

“That makes me want to know him all the more. But you’ll come yourself, at all events, eh?”

Poor Hyacinth murmured something about the unexpected honor; for, after all, he had a French heredity, and it was not so easy for him to make unadorned speeches. But Madame Grandoni, laying down her eyeglass, almost took the words out of his mouth, with the cheerful exhortation, “Go and see her — go and see her once or twice. She will treat you like an angel.”

“You must think me very peculiar,” the Princess remarked, sadly.

“I don’t know what I think. It will take a good while.”

“I wish I could make you trust me — inspire you with confidence,” she went on. “I don’t mean only you, personally, but others who think as you do. You would find I would go with you — pretty far. I was answering just now for Captain Sholto; but who in the world is to answer for me?” And her sadness merged itself in a smile, which appeared to Hyacinth extraordinarily beautiful and touching.

“Not I, my dear, I promise you!” her ancient companion ejaculated, with a laugh which made the people in the stalls look up at the box.

Her mirth was contagious; it gave Hyacinth the audacity to say to her, “I would trust you, if you did!” though he felt, the next minute, that this was even a more familiar speech than if he had said he wouldn’t trust her.

“It comes, then, to the same thing,” the Princess went on. “She would not show herself with me in public if I were not respectable. If you knew more about me, you would understand what has led me to turn my attention to the great social question. It is a long story, and the details wouldn’t interest you; but perhaps some day, if we have more talk, you will put yourself a little in my place. I am very serious, you know; I am not amusing myself with peeping and running away. I am convinced that we are living in a fool’s paradise, that the ground is heaving under our feet.”

“It’s not the ground, my dear; it’s you that are turning somersaults,” Madame Grandoni interposed.

“Ah, you, my friend, you have the happy faculty of believing what you like to believe. I have to believe what I see.”

“She wishes to throw herself into the revolution, to guide it, to enlighten it,” Madame Grandoni said to Hyacinth, speaking now with imperturbable grayity.

“I am sure she could direct it in any sense she would wish!” the young man responded, in a glow. The pure, high dignity with which the Princess had just spoken, and which appeared to cover a suppressed tremor of passion, set Hyacinth’s pulses throbbing, and though he scarcely saw what she meant — her aspirations seeming so vague — her tone, her voice, her wonderful face, showed that she had a generous soul.

She answered his eager declaration with a serious smile and a melancholy headshake. “I have no such pretensions, and my good old friend is sighing at me. Of course that is easy; for what, in fact, can be more absurd, on the face of it, than for a woman with a title, with diamonds, with a carriage, with servants, with a position, as they call it, to sympathize with the upward struggles of those who are below? ‘Give all that up, and we’ll believe you,’ you have a right to say. I am ready to give them up the moment it will help the cause; I assure you that’s the least difficulty. I don’t want to teach, I want to learn; and, above all, I want to know a quoi m’en tenir. Are we on the eve of great changes, or are we not? Is everything that is gathering force, underground, in the dark, in the night, in little hidden rooms, out of sight of governments and policemen and idiotic statesmen — Heaven save them! — is all this going to burst forth some fine morning and set the world on fire? Or is it to sputter out and spend itself in vain conspiracies, be dissipated in sterile heroisms and abortive isolated movements? I want to know a quoi m’en tenir,” she repeated, fixing her visitor with more brilliant eyes, as if he could tell her on the spot. Then, suddenly, she added in a totally different tone, “Excuse me, I have an idea you speak French. Didn’t Captain Sholto tell me so?”

“I have some little acquaintance with it,” Hyacinth murmured. “I have French blood in my veins.”

She considered him as if he had proposed to her some kind of problem. “Yes, I can see that you are not le premier venu. Now, your friend, of whom you were speaking, is a chemist; and you, yourself — what is your occupation?”

“I’m just a bookbinder.”

“That must be delightful. I wonder if you would bind some books for me.”

“ ou would have to bring them to our shop, and I can do there only the work that’s given out to me. I might manage it by myself, at home,” Hyacinth added, smiling.

“I should like that better. And what do you call home?”

“The place I live in, in the north of London: a little street you certainly never heard of.”

“What is it called?”

“Lomax Place, at your service,” said Hyacinth, laughing.

She laughed back at him, and he didn’t know whether her brightness or her gravity were the more charming. “No, I don’t think I have heard of it. I don’t know London very well; I haven’t lived here long. I have spent most of my life abroad. My husband is a foreigner, an Italian. We don’t live together much. I haven’t the manners of this country — not of any class; have I, eh? Oh, this country — there is a great deal to be said about it; and a great deal to be done, as you, of course, understand better than any one. But I want to know London; it interests me more than I can say — the huge, swarming, smoky, human city. I mean real London, the people and all their sufferings and passions; not Park Lane and Bond Street. Perhaps you can help me — it would be a great kindness: that’s what I want to know men like you for. You see it isn’t idle, my having given you so much trouble tonight.”

“I shall be very glad to show you all I know. But it isn’t much, and, above all, it isn’t pretty,” said Hyacinth.

“Whom do you live with, in Lomax, Place?” the Princess asked, by way of rejoinder to this.

“Captain Sholto is leaving the young lady — he is coming back here,” Madame Grandoni announced, inspecting the balcony with her instrument. The orchestra had been for some time playing the overture to the following act.

Hyacinth hesitated a moment. “I live with a dressmaker.”

“With a dressmaker? Do you mean — do you mean” — And the Princess paused.

“Do you mean she’s your wife?” asked Madame Grandoni, humorously.

“Perhaps she gives you rooms,” remarked the Princess.

“How many do you think I have? She gives me everything, or she has done so, in the past. She brought me up; she is the best little woman in the world.”

“You had better command a dress!” exclaimed Madame Grandoni.

“And your family, where are they?” the Princess continued. “I have no family.”

“None at all?”

“None at all. I never had.”

“But the French blood that you speak of, and which I see perfectly in your face — you haven’t the English expression, or want of expression — that must have come to you through some one.”

“Yes, through my mother.”

“And she is dead?”

“Long ago.”

“That’s a great loss, because French mothers are usually so much to their sons.” The Princess looked at her painted fan a moment, as she opened and closed it; after which she said, “Well, then, you’ll come some day. We’ll arrange it.”

Hyacinth felt that the answer to this could be only a silent inclination of his little person; and to make it he rose from his chair. As he stood there, conscious that he had stayed long enough, and yet not knowing exactly how to withdraw, the Princess, with her fan closed, resting upright on her knee, and her hands clasped on the end of it, turned up her strange, lovely eyes at him, and said —

“Do you think anything will occur soon?”

“Will occur?”

“That there will be a crisis — that you’ll make yourselves felt?”

In this beautiful woman’s face there was to Hyacinth’s bewildered perception something at once inspiring, tempting, and mocking; and the effect of her expression was to make him say, rather clumsily, “I’ll try and ascertain;” as if she had asked him whether her carriage were at the door.

“1 don’t quite know what you are talking about; but please don’t have it for another hour or two. I want to see what becomes of the Pearl!” Madame Grandoni interposed.

“Remember what I told you: I would give up everything — everything!” the Princess went on, looking up at the young man in the same way. Then she held out her hand, and this time he knew sufficiently what he was about to take .it.

When he bade goodnight to Madame Grandoni, the old lady exclaimed to him with a comical sigh, “Well, she is respectable!” and out in the lobby, when he had closed the door of the box behind him, he found himself echoing these words, and repeating mechanically, “She is respectable!” They were on his lips as he stood, suddenly, face to face with Captain Sholto, who laid his hand on his shoulder once more, and shook him a little, in that free yet insinuating manner for which this officer appeared to be remarkable.

“My dear fellow, you were born under a lucky star.”

“I never supposed it,” said Hyacinth, changing color.

“Why, what in the world would you have? You have the faculty, the precious faculty, of inspiring women

with an interest — but an interest!"

"Yes, ask them in the box there! I behaved like a cretin," Hyacinth declared, overwhelmed now with a sense of opportunities missed.

"They won't tell me that. And the lady upstairs?"

"Well," said Hyacinth gravely, "what about her?"

The captain considered him a moment. "She wouldn't talk to me of anything but you. You may imagine how I liked it!"

"I don't like it, either. But I must go up."

"Oh, yes, she counts the minutes. Such a charming person!" Captain Sholto added, with more propriety of tone. As Hyacinth left him he called after him, "Don't be afraid — you'll go far."

When the young man took his place in the balcony beside Millicent, this damsel gave him no greeting, nor asked any question about his adventures in the more aristocratic part of the house. She only turned her fine complexion upon him for some minutes, and as he himself was not in the mood to begin to chatter, the silence continued — continued till after the curtain had risen on the last act of the play. Millicent's attention was now, evidently, not at her disposal for the stage, and in the midst of a violent scene, which included pistol-shots and shrieks, she said at last to her companion, "She's a tidy lot, your Princess, by what I learn."

"Pray, what do you know about her?"

"I know what that fellow told me."

"And pray, what was that?"

"Well, she's a bad 'un, as ever was. Her own husband has had to turn her out of the house."

Hyacinth remembered the allusion the lady herself had made to her matrimonial situation; nevertheless, what he would have liked to reply to Miss Henning was that he didn' believe a word of it. He withheld the doubt, and after a moment remarked, quietly, "I don' care."

"You don' care? Well, I do, then!" Millicent cried. And as it was impossible, in view of the performance and the jealous attention of their neighbors, to continue the conversation in this pitch, she contented herself with ejaculating, in a somewhat lower key, at the end of five minutes, during which she had been watching the stage, "Gracious, what dreadful common stuff!"

Chapter XIV

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HYACINTH did not mention to Pinnie or Mr. Vetch that he had been taken up by a great lady; but he mentioned it to Paul Muniment, to whom he now confided a great many things. He had, at first, been in considerable fear of his straight, loud, North Country friend, who showed signs of cultivating logic and criticism to a degree that was hostile to free conversation; but he discovered, later, that he was a man to whom one could say anything in the world, if one didn't think it of more importance to be sympathized with than to be understood. For a revolutionist, he was strangely goodnatured. The sight of all the things he wanted to change had, seemingly, no power to irritate him, and if he joked about questions that lay very near his heart, his pleasantry was not bitter nor invidious; the fault that Hyacinth sometimes found with it, rather, was that it was innocent to puerility. Our hero envied his power of combining a care for the wide misery of mankind with the apparent state of mind of the cheerful and virtuous young workman who, on Sunday morning, has put on a clean shirt, and, not having taken the gilt off his wages the night before, weighs against each other, for a happy day, the respective attractions of Epping Forest and Gravesend. He was never sarcastic about his personal lot and his daily life; it had not seemed to occur to him, for instance, that "society" was really responsible for the condition of his sister's spinal column, though Eustache Poupin and his wife (who practically, however, were as patient as he) did everything they could to make him say so, believing, evidently, that it would relieve him. Apparently, he cared nothing for women, talked of them rarely, and always decently, and had never a sign of a sweetheart, unless Lady Aurora Langrish might pass for one. He never drank a drop of beer nor touched a pipe; he always had a clear tone, a fresh cheek, and a smiling eye, and once excited on Hyacinth's part a kind of elder-brotherly indulgence by the open-mouthed glee and credulity with which, when the pair were present, in the sixpenny gallery, at Astley's, at an equestrian pantomime, he followed the tawdry spectacle. He once told the young bookbinder that he was a suggestive little beggar, and Hyacinth's opinion of him, by this time, was so exalted that the remark had almost the value of a patent of nobility. Our hero treated himself to an unlimited belief in him; he had always dreamed of having some grand friendship, and this was the best opening he had ever encountered. No one could entertain a sentiment of that sort better than Hyacinth, or cultivate a greater luxury of confidence. It disappointed him, sometimes, that it was not more richly repaid; that on certain important points of the socialistic programme Muniment would never commit himself; and that he had not yet shown the fond du sac, as Eustache Poupin called it, to so ardent an admirer. He answered particular questions freely enough, and answered them, occasionally, in a manner that made Hyacinth jump, as when, in reply to an inquiry in regard to his view of capital punishment, he said that, so far from wishing it abolished, he should go in for extending it much further — he should impose it on those who habitually lied or got drunk; but his friend had always a feeling that he kept back his best card, and that even in the listening circle in Bloomsbury, where only the right men were present, there were unspoken conclusions in his mind which he didn't as yet think any one good enough to be favored with. So far, therefore, from suspecting him of halfheartedness, Hyacinth was sure that he had extraordinary things in his head; that he was thinking them out to the logical end, wherever it might laud him; and that the night he should produce them, with the door of the club-room guarded and the company bound by a tremendous oath, the others would look at each other and turn pale.

"She wants to see you; she asked me to bring you; she was very serious," Hyacinth said, relating his interview with the ladies in the box at the play; which, however, now that he looked back upon it, seemed as queer as a dream, and not much more likely than that sort of experience to have a continuation in one's waking hours.

"To bring me — to bring me where?" asked Muniment. "You talk as if I were a sample out of your shop, or a little dog you had for sale. Has she ever seen me? Does she think I'm smaller than you? What does she know about me?"

"Well, principally, that you 're a friend of mine — that's enough for her."

"Do you mean that it ought to be enough for me that she's a friend of yours? I have a notion you'll have some queer ones before you 're done; a good many more than I have time to talk to. And how can I go to see a delicate female, with those paws?" Muniment inquired, exhibiting ten work-stained fingers.

"Buy a pair of gloves," said Hyacinth, who recognized the serious character of this obstacle. But after a moment he added, "No, you oughtn't to do that; she wants to see dirty hands."

"That's easy enough; she needn't send for me for the purpose. But isn't she making game of you?"

"It's very possible, but I don't see what good it can do her."

"You are not obliged to find excuses for the pampered classes. Their bloated luxury begets evil, impudent desires; they are capable of doing harm for the sake of harm. Besides, is she genuine?"

"If she isn't, what becomes of your explanation?" asked Hyacinth.

"Oh, it doesn't matter: at night all cats are gray. Whatever she is, she's an idle, bedizened jade."

"If you had seen her, you wouldn't talk of her that way."

"God forbid I should see her, then, if she's going to corrupt me!"

"Do you suppose she'll corrupt me?" Hyacinth demanded, with an expression of face and a tone of voice which produced, on his friend's part, an explosion of mirth.

"How can she, after all, when you are already such a little mass of corruption?"

"Yon don't think that," said Hyacinth, looking very grave.

"Do you mean that if I did I wouldn't say it? Haven't you noticed that I say what I think?"

"No, you don't, not half of it: you 're as close as a fish."

Paul Muniment looked at his companion a moment, as if he were rather Struck with the penetration of that remark; then he said, "Well, then, if I should give you the other half of my opinion of you, do you think you 'd fancy it?"

"I'll save you the trouble. I'm a very clever, conscientious, promising young chap, and any one would be proud to claim me as a friend."

"Is that what your Princess told you? She must be a precious piece of goods!" Paul Muniment exclaimed. "Did she pick your pocket meanwhile?"

"Oh yes; a few minutes later I missed a silver cigar-case, engraved with the arms of the Robinsons. Seriously," Hyacinth continued, "don't you consider it possible that a woman of that class should want to know what is going on among the like of us?"

"It depends upon what class you mean."

"Well, a woman with a lot of jewels and the manners of an angel. It's queer, of course, but it's conceivable: why not? There may be unselfish natures; there may be disinterested feelings."

"And there may be fine ladies in an awful funk about their jewels, and even about their manners. Seriously, as you say, it's perfectly conceivable. I am not in the least surprised at the aristocracy being curious to know what we are up to, and wanting very much to look into it; in their place I should be very uneasy; and if I were a woman with angelic manners, very likely I too should be glad to get hold of a soft, susceptible little bookbinder, and pump him dry, bless his heart!"

"Are you afraid 111 tell her secrets?" cried Hyacinth, flushing with virtuous indignation.

"Secrets? What secrets could you tell her, my pretty lad?"

Hyacinth stared a moment. "You don't trust me — you never have."

"We will, some day — don't be afraid," said Muniment, who, evidently, had no intention of unkindness, a thing that appeared to be impossible to him. "And when we do, you'll cry with disappointment."

"Well, you won't," Hyacinth declared. And then he asked whether his friend thought the Princess Casamassima a spy; and why, if she were in that line, Mr. Sholto was not — inasmuch as it must be supposed he was not, since they had seen fit to let him walk in and out, at that rate, in the place in Bloomsbury. Muniment did not even know whom he meant, not having had any relations with the gentleman; but he summed up a sufficient image when his companion had described the captain's appearance. He then remarked, with his usual geniality, that he didn't take him for a spy — he took him for an ass; but even if he had edged himself into the place with every intention to betray them, what handle could he possibly get — what use, against them, could he make of anything he had seen or heard? If he had a fancy to dip into workingmen's clubs (Muniment remembered, now, the first night he came; he had been brought by that German cabinetmaker, who wore green spectacles and smoked a pipe with a bowl as big as a hat); if it amused him to put on a bad hat, and inhale foul tobacco, and call his "inferiors" "my dear fellow;" if he thought that in doing so he was getting an insight into the people, and going halfway to meet them, and preparing for what was coming — all this was his own affair, and he was very welcome, though a man must be a flat who would spend his evening in a hole like that when he might enjoy his comfort in one of those flaming big shops, full of armchairs and flunkies, in Pall Mall. And what did he see, after all, in Bloomsbury? Nothing but a "social gathering," where there were clay pipes, and a sanded floor, and not half enough gas, and the principal newspapers; and where the men, as any one would know, were advanced radicals, and mostly advanced idiots. He could pat as many of them on the back as he liked, and say the House of Lords wouldn't last till Christmas; but what discoveries would he make? He was simply on the same lay as Hyacinth's Princess; he was nervous and scared, and he thought he would see for himself.

"Oil, he isn't the same sort as the Princess. I'm sure he's in a very different line!" Hyacinth exclaimed.

"Different, of course: she's a handsome woman, I suppose, and he's an ugly man; but I don't think that either of them will save us or spoil us. Their curiosity is natural, but I have got other things to do than to show them about; therefore you can tell her serene highness that I'm much obliged."

Hyacinth reflected a moment, and then he said, "You show Lady Aurora about; you seem to wish to give her the information she desires; and what's the difference? If it's right for her to take an interest, why isn't it right for my Princess?"

"If she's already yours, what more can she want?" Muniment asked. "All I know of Lady Aurora, and all I look at, is that she comes and sits with Rosy, and brings her tea, and waits upon her. If the Princess will do as much, I'll tell her she's a woman of genius; but apart from that I shall never take a grain of interest in her interest in the masses — or in this particular mass!" And Paul Muniment, with his discolored thumb, designated his own substantial; person. His tone, was disappointing to Hyacinth, who was surprised at his not appearing to think the episode at the theatre more remarkable and romantic. Muniment seemed to regard his

explanation of such a proceeding as all-sufficient; but when, a moment later, he made use, in referring to the mysterious lady, of the expression that she was “quaking,” Hyacinth broke out— “Never in the world; she’s not afraid of anything!”

“Ah, my lad, not afraid of you, evidently!”

Hyacinth paid no attention to this coarse sally, but asked in a moment, with a candor that was proof against further ridicule, “Do you think she can do me a hurt of any kind, if we follow up our acquaintance?”

“Yes, very likely, but you must hit her back! That’s your line, you know: to go in for what’s going, to live your life, to gratify the women. I’m an ugly, grimy brute, that has got to watch the fires and mind the shop, but you are one of those taking little beggars who ought to run about and see the world; you ought to be an ornament to society, like a young man in an illustrated storybook. Only,” Muniment added in a moment, “you know, if she should hurt you very much, then I. would go and see her I “

Hyacinth had been intending for some time to take Pinnie to call on the prostrate damsel in Audley Court, to whom he had promised that his benefactress (he had told Rose Muniment that she was “a kind of aunt”) should pay this civility; but the affair had been delayed by wan hesitations on the part of the dressmaker, for the poor woman had hard work to imagine, to-day, that there were people in London so forlorn that her countenance could be of value to, them. Her social curiosities had become very nearly extinct, and she knew that she no longer made the same figure in public as when her command of the fashions enabled her to illustrate them in her own little person, by the aid of a good deal of whalebone. Moreover, she felt that Hyacinth had strange friends and still stranger opinions; she suspected that he took an unnatural interest in politics, and was somehow not on the right side, little as she knew about parties or causes; and she had a vague conviction that this kind of perversity only multiplied the troubles of the poor, who, according to theories which Pinnie had never reasoned out, but which, in her bosom, were as deep as religion, ought always to be of the same way of thinking as the rich. They were unlike them enough in their poverty, without trying to add other differences. When at last she accompanied Hyacinth to South Lambeth, one Saturday evening at midsummer, it was in a sighing, skeptical, second-best manner; but if he had told her he wished it, she would have gone with him to a soiree at a scavenger’s. There was no more danger of Eose Muniment’s being out than of one of the bronze couchaut lions in Trafalgar Square having walked down Whitehall; but he had let her know in advance, and he perceived, as he opened her door in obedience to a quick, shrill summons, that she had had the happy thought of inviting Lady Aurora to help her to entertain Miss Pynsent. Such, at least, was the inference lie drew from seeing her ladyship’s memorable figure rise before him for the first time since his own visit. He presented his companion to their recumbent hostess, and Rosy immediately repeated her name to the representative of Belgrave Square. Pinnie curtsied down to the ground, as Lady Aurora put out her hand to her, and slipped noiselessly into a chair beside the bed. Lady Aurora laughed and fidgeted, in a friendly, cheerful, yet at the same time rather pointless manner, and Hyacinth gathered that she had no recollection of having met him before. His attention, however, was mainly given to Pinnie: he watched her jealously, to see whether, on this important occasion, she would not put forth a certain stiff, quaint, polished politeness, of which she possessed the secret, and which made her resemble a pair of old-fashioned sugar-tongs. Not only for Pinnie’s sake, but for his own as well, he wished her to pass for a superior little woman, and he hoped she wouldn’t lose her head if Rosy should begin to talk about Inglefield. She was, evidently, much impressed by Rosy, and kept repeating, “Dear, dear!” under her breath, as the small, strange person in the bed rapidly explained to her that there was nothing in the world she would have liked so much as to follow her delightful profession, but that she couldn’t sit up to it, and had never had a needle in her hand but once, when, at the end of three minutes, it had dropped into the sheets and got into the mattress, so that she had always been afraid it would work out again, and stick into her; but it hadn’t done so yet, and perhaps it never would — she lay so quiet, she didn’t push it about much. “Perhaps you would think it ‘s me that trimmed the little handkerchief I wear round my neck,” Miss Muniment said; “perhaps you would think I couldn’t do less, lying here all day long, with complete command of my time. Not a stitch of it. I’m the finest lady in London; I never lift my finger for myself. It’s a present from her ladyship — it’s her ladyship’s own beautiful needlework. What do you think of that? Have you ever met any one so favored before? And the work — just look at the work, and tell me what you think of that!” The girl pulled off the bit of muslin from her neck and thrust it at Pinnie, who looked at it confusedly, and exclaimed, “Dear, dear, dear!” partly in sympathy, partly as if, in spite of the consideration she owed every one, those were very strange proceedings.

“It’s very badly done; surely you see that,” said Lady Aurora. “It was only a joke.”

“Oh, yes, everything’s a joke!” cried the irrepressible invalid— “everything except my state of health; that’s admitted to be serious. When her ladyship sends me five shillings’ worth of coals it’s only a joke; and when she brings me a bottle of the finest port, that’s another; and when she climbs up fifty-seven stairs (there are fifty-seven, I know perfectly, though I never go up or down), at the height of the London season, to spend the evening with me, that’s the best of all. I know all about the London season, though I never go out, and I appreciate what her ladyship gives up. She is very jocular indeed, but, fortunately, I know how to take it. You can see that it wouldn’t do for me to be touchy, can’t you, Miss Pynsent?”

“Dear, dear, I should be so glad to make you anything myself; it would be better — it would be better” — Pinnie murmured, hesitating.

“It would be better than my poor work. I don’t know how to do that sort of thing, in the least,” said Lady

Aurora.

"I'm sure I didn't mean that, my lady — I only meant it would be more natural like. Anything in the world she might fancy," the dressmaker went on, as if it were a question of the invalid's appetite.

"Ah, you see I don't wear things — only a flannel jacket, to be a bit tidy," Miss Muniment rejoined. "I go in only for smart counterpanes, as you can see for yourself," and she spread her white hands complacently over her coverlet of brilliant patchwork. "Now doesn't that look to you, Miss Pynsent, as if it might be one of her ladyship's jokes?"

"Oh, my good friend, how can you? "I never went so far as that!" Lady Aurora interposed, with visible anxiety.

"Well, you've given me almost everything; I sometimes forget. This only cost me sixpence; so it comes to the same thing as if it had been a present. Yes, only sixpence, in a raffle in a bazaar at Hackney, for the benefit of the Wesleyan Chapel, three years ago. A young man who works with my brother, and lives in that part, offered him a couple of tickets; and he took one, and I took one. When I say "I," of course I mean that he took the two; for how should I find (by which I mean, of course, how should he find) a sixpence in that little cup on the chimneypiece unless he had put it there first? Of course my ticket took a prize, and of course, as my bed is my dwelling-place, the prize was a beautiful counterpane, of every color of the rainbow. Oh, there never was such luck as mine!" Rosy exclaimed, flashing her gay, strange eyes at Hyacinth, as if on purpose to irritate him with her contradictious optimism.

"It's very lovely; but if you would like another, for a change, I've got a great many pieces," Pinnie remarked, with a generosity which made the young man feel that she was acquitting herself finely.

Rose Muniment laid her little hand on the dressmaker's arm, and responded, quickly, "No, not a change, not a change. How can there be a change when there's already everything? There's everything here — every color that was ever seen, or composed, or dreamed of, since the world began;" and with her other hand she stroked, affectionately, her variegated quilt. "You have a great many pieces, but you haven't as many as there are here and the more you should patch them together the more the whole thing won't resemble this dear; dazzling old friend. I have another idea, very, very charming, and perhaps her ladyship can guess what it is." Rosy kept her fingers ort Pinnie's arm, and, smiling, turned her brilliant eyes from one of her female companions to the other, as if she wished to associate them as much as possible in their interest in her. "In connection with what we were talking about a few minutes ago — couldn't your ladyship just go a little further, in the same line?" Then, as Lady Aurora looked troubled and embarrassed, blushing at being called upon to answer a conundrum, as it were, so publicly, her infirm friend came to her assistance. "It will surprise you at first, but it won't when I have explained it: my idea is just simply a pink-dressing-gown!"

"A pink dressing-gown!" Lady Aurora repeated.

"With a neat black trimming! Don't you see the connection with what we were talking of before our good visitors Came in?"

"That would be very pretty," said Pinnie. "I have made them like that, in my time. Or blue, trimmed with white."

"No, pink and black, pink and black — to suit my complexion. Perhaps you didn't know I hare a complexion; but there are very few things I haven't got! Anything at all I should fancy, you were so good as to say; well, now, I fancy that! Your ladyship does see the connection by this time, doesn't she?"

Lady Aurora looked distressed, as if she felt that she certainly ought to see it, but was not sure that even yet it didn't escape her, and as if, at the same time, she were struck with the fact that this sudden evocation might result in a strain on the little dressmaker's resources. "A pink dressing-gown would certainly be very becoming, and Miss Pynsent would be very kind," she said; while Hyacinth made the mental comment that it was a largish order, as Pinnie would have, obviously, to furnish the materials as well as the labor. The amiable coolness with which the invalid laid her under contribution was, however, to his sense, quite in character, and he reflected that, after all, when you were stretched on your back like that, you had the right to reach out your hands (it wasn't far you could reach them at best) and seize what you could get. Pinnie declared that she knew just the article Miss Muniment wanted, and that she would undertake to make a sweet thing of it; and Rosy went on to say that she must explain of what use such an article would be, but for this purpose there must be another guess. She would give it to Miss Pynsent and Hyacinth — as many times as they liked: What had she and Lady Aurora been talking about before they came in? She clasped her hands, and her eyes glittered with her eagerness, while she continued to turn them from Lady Aurora to the dressmaker. What would they imagine? What would they think natural, delightful, magnificent — if one could only end, at last, by making out the right place to put it? Hyacinth suggested, successively, a printing-press, a music-box, and a shower-bath — or perhaps even a full-length portrait of her ladyship; and Pinnie looked at him askance, in a frightened way, as if perchance he were joking too broadly. Rosy at last relieved their suspense, and announced, "A sofa, just a sofa, now! What do you say to that? Do you suppose that's an idea that could have come from any one but her ladyship? She must have all the credit of it; she came out with it in the course of conversation. I believe we were talking of the peculiar feeling that conies just under the shoulder-blades if one never has a change. She mentioned it as she might have mentioned a plaster, or another spoonful of that American stuff. We are thinking it over, and one of these days, if we give plenty of time to the question, we shall find the place, the very nicest and snuggest of all, and no other. I hope you see the connection with the

pink dressing-gown," she remarked to Pinnie, "and I hope you see the importance of the question, Shall anything go? I should like you to look round a bit, and tell me what you would answer if I were to say to you, Can anything go?"

Chapter XV

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"I'M SURE THERE'S nothing I should like to part with," Pinnie returned; and while she surveyed the scene, Lady Aurora, with delicacy, to lighten Amanda's responsibility, got up and turned to the window, which was open to the summer evening, and admitted, still, the last rays of the long day. Hyacinth, after a moment, placed himself beside her, looking out with her at the dusky multitude of chimney-pots and the small black houses, roofed with grimy tiles. The thick, warm air of a London July floated beneath them, suffused with the everlasting uproar of the town, which appeared to have sunk into quietness, but again became a mighty voice, as soon as one listened for it; here and there, in poor windows, glimmered a turbid light, and high above, in a clearer, smokeless zone, a sky still fair and luminous, a faint silver star looked down. The sky was the same that, far away in the country, bent over golden fields, and purple hills, and gardens where nightingales sang; but from this point of view everything that covered the earth was ugly and sordid, and seemed to express, or to represent, the weariness of toil. In an instant, to Hyacinth's surprise, Lady Aurora said to him, "You never came, after all, to get the books."

"Those you kindly offered to lend me? I didn't know it was an understanding."

Lady Aurora gave an uneasy laugh. "I have picked them out; they are quite ready."

"It's very kind of you," the young man rejoined. " I will come and get them some day, with pleasure." He was not very sure that he would; but it was the least he could say.

"She'll tell you where I live, you know," Lady Aurora went on, with a movement of her head in the direction of the bed, as if she were too shy to mention it herself.

"Oh, I have no doubt she knows the way — she could tell me every street and every turn!" Hyacinth exclaimed.

"She has made me describe to her, very often, how I come and go. I think that few people know more about London than she. She never forgets anything."

"She's a wonderful little witch — she terrifies me!" said Hyacinth.

Lady Aurora turned her modest eyes upon him. "Oh, she's so good, she's so patient!"

"Yes, and so wise, and so self-possessed."

"Oh, she's immensely clever," said her ladyship. "Which do you think the cleverest?"

"The cleverest?"

"I mean of the girl and her brother."

"Oh, I think he, some day, will be prime minister of England."

"Do you really? I'm so glad!" cried Lady Aurora, with a flush of color in her face. "I'm so glad you think that will be possible. You know it ought to be, if things were right."

Hyacinth had not professed this high faith for the purpose of playing upon her ladyship's feelings, but when he perceived her eager responsiveness he felt almost as if he had been making sport of her. Still, he said no more than he believed when he remarked, in a moment, that he had the greatest expectations of Paul Muniment's future: he was sure that the world would hear of him, that England would feel him, that the public, some day, would acclaim him. It was impossible to associate with him without feeling that he was very strong, that he must play an important part.

"Yes, people wouldn't believe — they wouldn't believe," Lady Aurora murmured softly, appreciatively. She was evidently very much pleased with what Hyacinth was saying. It was, moreover, a pleasure to himself to place , on record his opinion of his friend; it seemed to make that opinion more clear, to give it the force of an invocation, a prophecy. This was especially the case when he asked why oil earth nature had endowed Paul Muniment with such extraordinary powers of mind, and powers of body too — because he was as strong as a horse — if it had not been intended that he should do something great for his fellowmen. Hyacinth confided to her ladyship that he thought the people in his own class generally very stupid — what he should call third-rate minds. He wished it were not so, for Heaven knew that he felt kindly to them, and only asked to cast his lot with theirs; but he was obliged to confess that centuries of poverty, of ill-paid toil, of bad, insufficient food and wretched homes, had not a favorable effect upon the higher faculties. All the more reason that when there was a splendid exception, like Paul Muniment, it should count for a tremendous force — it had so much to make up for, to act for. And then Hyacinth repeated that in his own low walk of life people had really not the faculty of thought; their minds had been simplified — reduced to two or three elements. He saw that this declaration made his interlocutress very uncomfortable; she turned and twisted herself, vaguely, as if she wished to protest, but she was far too considerate to interrupt him. He had no desire to distress her, but there were times in which it was impossible for him to withstand the perverse satisfaction he took in insisting on his lowliness of station, in turning the knife about in the wound inflicted by such explicit reference, and in letting it be seen

that if his place in the world was immeasurably small he at least had no illusions about either himself or his fellows. Lady Aurora replied, as quickly as possible, that she knew a great deal about the poor — not the poor like Rose Muniment, but the terribly, wretchedly poor, with whom she was more familiar than Hyacinth would perhaps believe — and that she was often struck with their great talents, with their quick wit, with their conversation being really much more entertaining, to her at least, than what one usually heard in drawingrooms. She often found them very, very clever.

Hyacinth smiled at her, and said, “Ah, when you get to the lowest depths of poverty, they may become very brilliant again. But I’m afraid I haven’t gone so far down. In spite of my opportunities, I don’t know many absolute paupers.”

“I know a great many.” Lady Aurora hesitated, as if she didn’t like to boast, and then she added, “I dare say I know more than any one.” There was something touching, beautiful, to Hyacinth, in this simple, diffident admission; it confirmed his impression that Lady Aurora was in some mysterious, incongruous, and even slightly ludicrous manner a heroine, a creature of a noble ideal. She perhaps guessed that he was indulging in reflections that might be favorable to her, for she said, precipitately, the next minute, as if there were nothing she dreaded so much as the danger of a compliment, “I think your aunt “s so very attractive — and I’m sure Eose Muniment thinks so.” No sooner had she spoken than she blushed again; it appeared to have occurred to her that he might suppose she wished to contradict him by presenting this case of his aunt as a proof that the baser sort, even in a prosaic upper stratum, were not without redeeming points. There was no reason why she should not have had this intention; so without sparing her, Hyacinth replied —

“You mean that she’s an exception to what I was saying?”

Lady Aurora stammered a little; then, at last, as if, since he wouldn’t spare her, she wouldn’t spare him, either, “Yes, and you ‘re an exception too; you’ll not make me believe you’re wantin’ in intelligence. The Munimets don’t think so,” she added.

“No more do I myself; but that doesn’t prove that exceptions are not frequent. I have blood in my veins that is not the blood of the people.”

“Oh, I see,” said Lady Aurora, sympathetically. And with a smile she went on: “Then you’re all the more of an exception — in the upper class.”

Her smile was the kindest in the world, but it did not blind Hyacinth to the fact that, from his own point of view, he had been extraordinarily indiscreet. He believed, a moment before, that he would have been proof against the strongest temptation to refer to the mysteries of his lineage, inasmuch as, if made in a boastful spirit (and he had no desire as yet to make it an exercise in humility), any such reference would inevitably contain an element of the grotesque. He had never opened his lips to any one about his birth (since the dreadful days when the question was discussed, with Mr. Vetch’s assistance, in Lomax Place); never even to Paul Muniment, never to Millicent Henning nor to Eustache Poupin. He had an impression that people had ideas about him, and with some of Miss Henning’s who had been made acquainted: they were of such a nature that he sometimes wondered whether the tie which united him to her were not, on her own side, a secret determination to satisfy her utmost curiosity before she had done with him. But he flattered himself that he was impenetrable, and none the less he had begun to swagger, idiotically, the first time a temptation (to call a temptation) presented itself. He turned crimson as soon as he had spoken, partly at the sudden image of what he had to swagger about, and partly at the absurdity of a challenge having appeared to proceed from the bashful gentlewoman before him. He hoped she didn’t particularly regard what he had said (and indeed she gave no sign whatever of being startled by his claim to a pedigree — she had too much quick delicacy for that; she appeared to notice only the symptoms of confusion that followed it), but, as soon as possible, he gave himself a lesson in humility by saying, “I gather that you spend most of your time among the poor, and I am sure you carry blessings with you. But I frankly confess that I don’t understand a lady giving herself up to people like us, when there is no obligation. Wretched company we must be, when there is so much better to be had.”

“I like it very much — you don’t understand.”

“Precisely — that is what I say. Our little friend on the bed is perpetually talking about your house, your family, your splendors, your gardens and greenhouses; they must be magnificent, of course” —

“Oh, I wish she wouldn’t; really, I wish she wouldn’t. It makes one feel dreadfully!” Lady Aurora interposed, with vehemence.

“Ah, you had better give her her way; it’s such a pleasure to her.”

“Yes, more than to any of us!” sighed her ladyship, helplessly.

“Well, how can you leave all those beautiful things, to come and breathe this beastly air, surround yourself with hideous images, and associate with people whose smallest fault is that they are ignorant, brutal, and dirty? I don’t speak of the ladies here present,” Hyacinth added, with the manner which most made Millicent Henning (who at once admired and hated it) wonder where on earth he had got it.

“Oh, I wish I could make you understand!” cried Lady Aurora, looking at him with troubled, appealing eyes, as if he were unexpectedly discouraging.

“After all, I do understand! Charity exists in your nature, as a kind of passion.”

“Yes, yes, it’s a kind of passion!” her ladyship repeated, eagerly, very thankful for the word. “I don’t know

whether it's charity — I don't mean that. But whatever it is, it's a passion — it's my life — it's all I care for." She hesitated a moment, as if there might be something indecent in the confession, or dangerous in the recipient; and then, evidently, she was mastered by the comfort of being able to justify herself for an eccentricity that had excited notice, as well as by the luxury of discharging her soul of a long accumulation of timid, sacred sentiment. "Already, when I was fifteen years old, I wanted to sell all I had, and give to the poor. And ever since, I have wanted to do something; it has seemed as if my heart would break, if I shouldn't be able!"

Hyacinth was struck with a great respect, which, however, did not prevent him (the words sounded patronizing, even to himself) from saying in a moment, "I suppose you are very religious."

Lady Aurora looked away, into the thickening dusk, at the smutty housetops, the blurred emanation, above the streets, of lamplight. "I don't know — one has one's ideas — some of them may be strange. I think a great many clergymen do good, but there are others I don't like at all. I dare say we had too many, always, at home; my father likes them so much. I think I have known too many bishops; I have had the church too much on my back. I dare say they wouldn't think at home, you know, that one was quite what one ought to be; but of course they consider me very odd, in every way, as there '& no doubt I am. I should tell you that I don't tell them everything; for what's the use, when people don't understand? We are thirteen at home, and eight of us are girls; and if you think it's so very splendid, and she thinks so, I should like you both to try it for a little! My father isn't rich, and we none of us are married, and we are not at all handsome, and — oh, there are all kinds of things," the young woman went on, looking round at him an instant, shyly but excitedly. "I don't like society; and neither would you if you were to see the kind there is in London — at least in some parts," Lady Aurora added, considerately. "I dare say you wouldn't believe all the humbuggery and the tiresomeness that one has to go through. But I've got out of it; I'm as I like, though it has been rather a struggle. I have my liberty, and that is the greatest blessing in life, except the reputation of being queer, and even a little mad, which is a greater advantage still. I'm a little mad, you know; you needn't be surprised if you hear it. That's because I stop in town when they go into the country; all the autumn, all the winter, when there's no one here (except three or four millions), and the rain drips, drips, drips, from the trees in the big, dull park, where my people live. I dare say I oughtn't to. say such things to you, but, as I tell you, I'm a little mad, and I might as well keep up my character. When one. is one of eight daughters, and there's very little money (for any of us, at least), and there's nothing to do but to go out with three or four others in a mackintosh, one can easily go off one's head. Of course there's the village, and it's not at all a nice one, and there are the people to look after, and Heaven knows they 're in want of it; but one must work with the vicarage, and at the vicarage there arc four more daughters, and it's dreary, and it's dreadful, and one has too much of it, and they don't understand what one thinks or feels, or a single word one says to them! Besides, they are stupid, I admit — the country poor; they are very, very dense. I like South Lambeth better," said Lady Aurora, smiling and taking breath, at the end of her nervous, hurried, almost incoherent speech, of which she had delivered herself pantingly, with strange intonations and grotesque movements of her neck, as if she were afraid, from one moment to the other, that she would repent, not of her confidence, but of her egotism.

It placed her, for Hyacinth, in an unexpected light, and made him feel that her awkward, aristocratic spinsterhood was the cover of tumultuous passions. No one could have less the appearance of being animated by a vengeful irony; but he saw that this delicate, shy, generous, and evidently most tender creature was not a person to spare, wherever she could prick them, the institutions among which she had been brought up, and against which she had violently reacted. Hyacinth had always supposed that a reactionary meant a backslider from the liberal faith, but Rosy's devotee gave a new value to the term; she appeared to have been driven to her present excuses by the squire and the parson, and the conservative influences of that upper-class British home which our young man had always supposed to be the highest fruit of civilization. It was clear that her ladyship was an original, and an original with force; but it gave Hyacinth a real pang to hear her make light of Inglefield (especially the park), and of the opportunities that must have abounded in Belgrave Square. It had been his belief that in a world of suffering and injustice these things were, if not the most righteous, at least the most fascinating. If they didn't give one the finest sensations, where were such sensations to be had? He looked at Lady Aurora with a face which was a tribute to her sudden vividness, and said, "I can easily understand your wanting to do some good in the world, because you 're a kind of saint."

"A very curious kind!" laughed her ladyship.

"But I don't understand your not liking what your position gives you."

"I don't know anything about my position. I want to live!"

"And do you call this life?"

"I'll tell you what my position is, if you want to know: it's the dullness of the grave!"

Hyacinth was startled by her tone, but he nevertheless laughed back at her, "Ah, as I say, you 're a kind of saint!" She made no reply, for at that moment the door opened, and Paul Muniment's tall figure emerged from the blackness of the staircase into the twilight, now very faint, of the room. Lady Aurora's eyes, as they rested upon him, seemed to declare that such a vision as that, at least, was life. Another person, as tall as himself, appeared behind him, and Hyacinth recognized with astonishment their insinuating friend, Captain Sholto. Muniment had brought him up for Rosy's entertainment, being ready, and more than ready, always, to usher in any one in the world, from the prime minister to the common hangman, who might give that young lady a

sensation. They must have met in Bloomsbury, and if the captain, some accident smoothing the way, had made him half as many advances as he had made some other people, Hyacinth could see that it wouldn't take long for Paul to lay him under contribution. But what the mischief was the captain up to? It cannot be said that our young man arrived, this evening, at an answer to that question. The occasion proved highly festal, and the hostess rose to it without lifting her head from the pillow. Her brother introduced Captain Sholto as a gentleman who had a great desire to know extraordinary people, arid she made him take possession of the chair at her bedside, out of which Miss Pynsent quickly edged herself, and asked him who he was, and where he came from, and how Paul had made his acquaintance, and whether he had many friends in South Lambeth. Sholto had not the same grand air that hovered about him at the theatre: he was shabbily dressed, very much like Hyacinth himself; but his appearance gave our young man an opportunity to wonder what made him so unmistakably a gentleman, in spite of his seedy coat and trousers — in spite, too, of his rather overdoing the manner of being appreciative even to rapture, and thinking everything and every one most charming and curious. He stood out, in poor Rosy's tawdry little room, among her hideous attempts at decoration, and looked to Hyacinth a being from another sphere, playing over the place and company a smile (one couldn't call it false or unpleasant, yet it was distinctly not natural), of which he had got the habit in camps and courts. It became brilliant when it rested on Hyacinth, and the captain greeted him as he might have done a dear young friend from whom he had been long and painfully separated. He was easy, he was familiar, he was exquisitely benevolent and bland, and altogether incomprehensible.

Rosy was a match for him, however. He evidently didn't puzzle her in the least; she thought his visit the most natural thing in the world. She expressed all the gratitude that decency required, but appeared to assume that people who climbed her stairs would always find themselves repaid. She remarked that her brother must have met him for the first time that day, for the way that he sealed a new acquaintance was usually by bringing the person immediately to call upon her. And when the captain said that if she didn't like them he supposed the poor wretches were dropped on the spot, she admitted that this would be true if it ever happened that she disapproved; as yet, however, she had not been obliged to draw the line. This was perhaps partly because he had not brought up any of his political friends — people that he knew only for political reasons. Of these people, in general, she had a very small opinion, and she would not conceal from Captain Sholto that she hoped he was not one of them. Rosy spoke as if her brother represented South Lambeth, at least, in the House of Commons, and she had discovered that a parliamentary career lowered the moral tone. The captain, however, entered quite into her views, and told her that it was as common friends of Mr. Hyacinth Robinson that Mr. Muniment and he had come together; they were both so fond of him that this had immediately constituted a kind of tie. On hearing himself commemorated in such a brilliant way, Mr. Hyacinth Robinson averted himself; he saw that Captain Sholto might be trusted to make as great an effort for Rosy's entertainment as he gathered that he had made for that of Millicent Henning, that evening at the theatre. There were not chairs enough to go round, and Paul fetched a three-legged stool from his own apartment, after which he undertook to make tea for the company, with the aid of n tin kettle and a spirit-lamp; these implements having been set out, flanked by half a dozen Cups, in honor, presumably, of the little dressmaker, who was to come such a distance. The little dressmaker, Hyacinth observed with pleasure, fell into earnest conversation with Lady Aurora, who bent over her, flushed, smiling, and stammering, and apparently so nervous that Pinnie, in comparison, was majestic and serene. They communicated presently to Hyacinth a plan they had unanimously evolved, to the effect that Miss Pynsent should go home to Belgrave Square with her ladyship, to settle certain preliminaries in regard to the pink dressing-gown, toward which, if Miss Pynsent assented, her ladyship hoped to be able to contribute sundry morsels of stuff, which had proved their quality in honorable service, and might be dyed to the proper tint. Pinnie, Hyacinth could see, was in a state of religious exaltation; the visit to Belgrave Square and the idea of cooperating in such a manner with the nobility were privileges she could not take solemnly enough. The latter luxury, indeed, she began to enjoy without delay; Lady Aurora suggesting that Mr. Muniment might be rather awkward about making tea, and that they should take the business off his hands. Paul gave it up to them, with a pretense of compassion for their conceit, remarking that at any rate it took two women to supplant one man; and Hyacinth drew him to the window, to ask where he had encountered Sholto, and how he liked him.

They had met in Bloomsbury, as Hyacinth supposed, and Sholto had made up to him very much as a country curate might make up to an archbishop. He wanted to know what he thought of this and that: of the state of the labor-market at the East End, of the terrible case of the old woman who had starved to death at Walham Green, of the practicability of more systematic out-of-door agitation, and the prospects of their getting one of their own men — one of the Bloomsbury lot — into Parliament. "He was mighty civil," Muniment said, "and I don't find that he has picked my pocket. He looked as if he would like me to suggest that he should stand as one of our own men, one of the Bloomsbury lot. He asks too many questions, but he makes up for it by not paying any attention to the answers. He told me he would give the world to see a workingman's 'interior.' I didn't know what he meant at, first: he wanted a favorable specimen, one of the best; he had seen one or two that he didn't believe to be up to the average. I suppose he meant his Dutch cabinetmaker, and he wanted to compare. I told him I didn't know what sort of a specimen my place would be, but that he was welcome to look round, and that it contained at any rate one or two original features. I expect he has found that's the case — with Rosy and the noble lady. I wanted to show him off to Rosy; he's good for that, if he isn't

good for anything else. I told him we expected a little company this evening, so it might be a good time; and he cried that to mingle in such an occasion as that was the dream of his existence. He seemed in a rare hurry, as if I were going to show him a hidden treasure, and insisted on driving me over in a hansom. Perhaps his idea is to introduce the use of cabs among the working-classes; certainly, I'll vote for him for Parliament, if that's his line. On our way over he talked to me about you: told me you were an intimate friend of his."

"What did he say about me?" Hyacinth inquired, with promptness.

"Vain little beggar!"

"Did he call me that?" said Hyacinth, ingenuously.

"He said you were simply astonishing."

"Simply astonishing?" Hyacinth repeated.

"For a person of your low extraction."

"Well, I may be queer, but he is certainly queerer. Don't you think so, now you know him?"

Paul Muniment looked at his young friend a moment. "Do you want to know what he is? He's a tout."

"A tout? What do you mean?"

"Well, a cat's-paw, if you like better."

Hyacinth stared. "For whom, pray?"

"Or a fisherman, if you like better still. I give you your choice of comparison. I made them up as we came along in the hansom. He throws his nets and hauls in the little fishes — the pretty little shining, wriggling fishes. They are all for her; she swallows 'em down."

"For her? Do you mean the Princess?"

"Her serene highness. Take care, my tadpole!"

"Why should I take care? The other day you told me not to."

"Yes, I remember. But now I see more."

"Did he speak of her? What did he say?" asked Hyacinth, eagerly.

"I can't tell you now what he said, but I'll tell you what I guessed."

"And what's that?"

They had been talking, of course, in a very low tone, and their voices were covered by Rosy's chatter in the corner, by the liberal laughter with which Captain Sholto accompanied it, and by the much more discreet, though earnest, intermingled accents of Lady Aurora and Miss Pynsent. But Paul Muniment spoke more softly still — Hyacinth felt a kind of suspense — as he replied in a moment, "Why, she's a monster!"

"A monster?" repeated our young man, from whom, this evening, Paul Muniment seemed destined to elicit ejaculations and echoes.

Muniment glanced toward the captain, who was apparently more and more fascinated with Rosy. "In him I think there's no great harm. He's only a conscientious fisherman!"

It must be admitted that Captain Sholto justified to a certain extent this definition by the manner in which he baited his hook for such little facts as might help him to a more intimate knowledge of his host and hostess. When the tea was made, Rose Muniment asked Miss Pynsent to be so good as to hand it about. They must let her poor ladyship rest a little, must they not? — and Hyacinth could see that in her innocent but inveterate self-complacency she wished to reward and encourage the dressmaker, draw her out and present her still more, by offering her this graceful exercise. Sholto sprang up at this, and begged Pinnie to let him relieve her, taking a cup from her hand; and poor Pinnie, who perceived, in a moment, that he was some kind of masquerading gentleman, who was bewildered by the strange mixture of elements that surrounded her, and unused to being treated like a duchess (for the Captain's manner was a triumph of respectful gallantry), collapsed, on the instant, into a chair, appealing to Lady Aurora with a frightened smile, and conscious that, deeply versed as she might be in the theory of decorum, she had no precedent that could meet such an occasion. "Now, how many families would there be in such a house as this, and what should you say about the sanitary arrangements? Would there be others on this floor — what is it, the third, the fourth? — beside yourselves, you know, and should you call it a fair specimen of a tenement of his class?" It was with such inquiries as this that Captain Sholto beguiled their tea-drinking, while Hyacinth made the reflection that, though he evidently meant them very well, they were characterized by a want of fine tact, by too patronizing a curiosity. The captain requested information as to the position in life, the avocations and habits, of the other lodgers, the rent they paid, their relations with each other, both in and out of the family. "Now, would there be a good deal of close packing, do you suppose, and any perceptible want of — a — sobriety?"

Paul Muniment, who had swallowed his cup of tea at a single gulp — there was no offer of a second — gazed out of the window into the dark, which had now come on, with his hands in his pockets, whistling, impolitely, no doubt, but with brilliant animation. He had the manner of having made over their visitor altogether to Rosy, and of thinking that whatever he said or did it was all so much grist to her indefatigable little mill. Lady Aurora looked distressed and embarrassed, and it is a proof of the degree to which our little hero had the instincts of a man of the world that he guessed exactly how vulgar she thought this new acquaintance. She was, doubtless, rather vexed, also — Hyacinth had learned this evening that Lady Aurora could be vexed — at the alacrity of Rosy's responses; the little person in the bed gave the captain every satisfaction, considered his questions as a proper tribute to humble respectability, and supplied him, as regards the population of Audley Court, with statistics and anecdotes which she had picked up by mysterious processes

of her own. At last Lady Aurora, upon whom Paul Muniment had not been at pains to bestow much conversation, took leave of her, and signified to Hyacinth that for the rest of the evening she would assume the care of Miss Pynsent. Pinnie looked very tense and solemn, now that she was really about to be transported to Belgrave Square, but Hyacinth was sure she would acquit herself only the more honorably; and when he offered to call for her there, later, she reminded him, under her breath, with a little sad smile, of the many years during which, after nightfall, she had carried her work, pinned up in a cloth, about London.

Paul Muniment, according to his habit, lighted Lady Aurora downstairs, and Captain Sholto and Hyacinth were alone for some minutes with Rosy; which gave the former, taking up his hat and stick, an opportunity to say to his young friend, “Which way are you going? Not my way, by chance?” Hyacinth saw that he hoped for his company, and he became conscious that, strangely as Muniment had gratified him, and too promiscuously investigating as he had just shown himself, this ingratiating personage was not more easy to resist than he had been the other night at the theatre. The captain bent over Rosy’s bed as if she had been a fine lady on a satin sofa, promising to come back very soon and very often, and the two men went downstairs. On their way they met Paul Muniment, coming up, and Hyacinth felt rather ashamed, he could scarcely tell why, that his friend should see him marching off with the “tout.” After all, if Muniment had brought him to see his sister, might not he at least walk with him?” I’m coming again, you know, very often. I dare say you’ll find me a great bore!” the captain announced, as he bade goodnight to his host. “Your sister is a most interesting person, one of the most interesting persons I have ever seen, and the whole thing, you know, exactly the sort of thing I wanted to get at, only much more — really, much more — original and curious. It has been a great success, a grand success!” And the captain felt his way down the dusky shaft, while Paul Muniment, above, gave him the benefit of rather a wavering candlestick, and answered his civil speech with an “Oh, well, you take us as you find us, you know!” and an outburst of frank but not unfriendly laughter.

Half an hour later, Hyacinth found himself in Captain Sholto’s chambers, seated on a big divan, covered with Persian rugs and cushions, and smoking the most delectable cigar that had ever touched his lips. As they left Audley Court the captain had taken his arm, and they had walked along together in a desultory, colloquial manner, till on Westminster Bridge (they had followed the embankment, beneath St. Thomas’s Hospital) Sholto said, “By the way, why shouldn’t you come home with me, and see my little place? I’ve got a few things that might amuse you — some pictures, some odds and ends I’ve picked up, and a few bindings; you might tell me what you think of them.”

Hyacinth assented, without hesitation; he had still in his ear the reverberation of the’ captain’s inquiries in Rose Muniment’s room, and he saw no reason why he, on his side, should not embrace an occasion of ascertaining how, as his companion would have said, a man of fashion would live now.

This particular specimen lived in a large, old-fashioned house in Queen Anne Street, of which he occupied the upper floors, and whose high, wainscoted rooms he had filled with the spoils of travel and the ingenuities of modern taste. There was not a country in the world he did not appear to have ransacked, and to Hyacinth his trophies represented a wonderfully long purse. The whole establishment, from the low-voiced, inexpressive valet who, after he had poured brandy into tall tumblers, gave dignity to the popping of soda-water corks, to the quaint little silver receptacle in which he was invited to deposit the ashes of his cigar, was such a revelation for our appreciative hero that he felt himself hushed and made sad, so poignant was the thought that it took thousands of things which he, then, should never possess nor know to make an accomplished man. He had often, in evening walks, wondered what was behind the walls of certain spacious, bright-windowed houses in the West End, and now he got an idea. The first effect of the idea was to overwhelm him.

“Well, now, tell me what you thought of our friend the Princess,” the captain said, thrusting out the loose yellow slippers which his servant had helped to exchange for his shoes. He spoke as if he had been waiting impatiently for the proper moment to ask that question, so much might depend on the answer.

“She’s beautiful — beautiful,” Hyacinth answered, almost dreamily, with his eyes wandering all over the room.

“She was so interested in all you said to her; she would like so much to see you again. She means to write to you — I suppose she can address to the place in Bloomsbury? — and I hope you’ll go to her house, if she proposes a day.”

“I don’t know — I don’t know. It seems so strange.”

“What seems strange, my dear fellow?”

“Everything! My sitting here with you; my introduction to that lady; the idea of her wanting, as you say, to see me again, and of her writing to me; and this whole place of yours, with all these dim, rich curiosities hanging on the walls, and glinting in the light of that rose-colored lamp. You yourself, too — you are strangest of all.”

The captain looked at him, in silence, so fixedly for a while, through the fumes of their tobacco, after he had made this last charge, that Hyacinth thought he was perhaps offended; but this impression was presently dissipated by further manifestations of sociability and hospitality, and Sholto took occasion, later, to let him know how important it was, in the days they were living in, not to have too small a measure of the usual, destined as they certainly were— “in the whole matter of the relations of class with class, and all that sort of thing, you know” — to witness some very startling developments. The captain spoke as if, for his part, he were a child of his age (so that he only wanted to see all it could show him), down to the point of his yellow

slippers. Hyacinth felt that he himself had not been very satisfactory about the Princess; but as his nerves began to tremble a little more into tune with the situation, he repeated to his host what Millicent Henning had said about her at the theatre — asked if this young lady had correctly understood him in believing that she had been turned out of the house by her husband.

"Yes, he literally pushed her into the street — or into the garden; I believe the scene took place in the country. But perhaps Miss Henning didn't mention, or perhaps I didn't mention, that the Prince would at the present hour give everything he owns in the world to get her back. Fancy such a scene!" said the captain, laughing in a manner that struck Hyacinth as rather profane.

He stared, with dilated eyes, at this picture, which seemed to evoke a comparison with the only incident of the sort that had come within his experience — the forcible ejection of intoxicated females from public houses. "That magnificent being — what had she done?" " Oh, she had made him feel he was an ass!" the captain answered, promptly. He turned the conversation to Miss Henning; said he was so glad Hyacinth gave him an opportunity to speak of her. He got on with her famously; perhaps she had told him. They became immense friends — en tout bien, tout honneur, s'entend. Now, there was another London type, plebeian but brilliant; and how little justice one usually did it, how magnificent it was! But she, of course, was a wonderful specimen. "My dear fellow, I have seen many women, and the women of many countries," the captain went on, "and I have seen them intimately, and I know what I am talking about; and when I tell you that that one — that one" — Then he suddenly paused, laughing in his democratic way. "But perhaps I am going too far: you must always pull me up, you know, when I do. At any rate, I congratulate you; I do, heartily. Have another cigar. Now what sort of — a — salary would she receive at her big shop, you know? I know where it is; I mean to leave here and buy some pockethandkerchiefs."

Hyacinth knew neither how far Captain Sholto had been going, nor exactly on what he congratulated him; and he pretended, at least, au equal ignorance on the subject of Millicent's salary. He didn't want to talk about her, moreover, nor about his own life; he wanted to talk about the captain's, and to elicit information that would be in harmony with his romantic chambers, which reminded our hero somehow of Bulwer's novels. His host gratified this desire most liberally, and told him twenty stories of things that had happened to him in Albania, in Madagascar, and even in Paris. Hyacinth induced him easily to talk about Paris (from a different point of view from M. Poupin's), and sat there drinking in enchantments. The only thing that fell below the high level of his entertainment was the bindings of the captain's books, which he told him frankly, with the conscience of an artist, were not very good. After he left Queen Anne Street, he was quite too excited to go straight home; he walked about, with his mind full of images and strange speculations, till the gray London streets began to grow clear with the summer dawn.

Chapter XVI

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THE ASPECT OF South Street, Mayfair, on a Sunday afternoon in August, is not enlivening, yet the Prince had stood for ten minutes gazing out of the window at the genteel vacancy of the scene: at the closed blinds of the opposite houses; the lonely policeman on the corner, covering a yawn with a white cotton hand; the low-pitched light itself, which seemed conscious of an obligation to observe the decency of the British Sabbath. The Prince, however, had a talent for that kind of attitude; it was one of the things by which he had exasperated his wife; he could remain motionless, with the aid of some casual support for his high, lean person, considering serenely and inexpressively any object that might lie before him, and presenting his aristocratic head at a favorable angle, for periods of extraordinary length. On first coming into the room he had given some attention to its furniture and decorations, perceiving at a glance that they were rich and varied; some of the things he recognized as old friends, odds and ends the Princess was fond of, which had accompanied her in her remarkable wanderings, while others were unfamiliar, and suggested vividly that she had not ceased to "collect." The Prince made two reflections: one was that she was living as expensively as ever; the other that, however this might be, no one had such a feeling as she for the mise-en-seene of life, such a talent for arranging a room. She had still the most charming salon in Europe.

It was his impression that she had taken the house in South Street but for three months; yet, gracious heaven, what had she not put into it? The Prince asked himself this question without violence, for that was not to be his line to-day. He could be angry to a point at which he himself was often frightened, but he honestly believed that this was only when he had been baited beyond endurance, and that as a usual thing he was really as mild and accommodating as the extreme urbanity of his manner appeared to announce. There was indeed nothing to suggest to the world in general that he was an impracticable or vindictive nobleman: his features were not regular, and his complexion had a bilious tone; but his dark brown eye, which was at once salient and dull, expressed benevolence and melancholy; his head drooped from his long neck in a considerate, attentive style; and his close-cropped black hair, combined with a short, fine, pointed beard, completed his resemblance to some old portrait of a personage of distinction under the Spanish dominion at Naples. To-day, at any rate, he had come in conciliation, almost in humility, and that is why he did not permit himself even to

murmur at the long delay to which he was .subjected. He knew very well that if his wife should consent to take him back it would be only after a probation to which this little wait in her drawingroom was a trifle. It was a quarter of an hour before the door opened, and even then it was not the Princess who appeared,- but only Madame Grandoni.

Their greeting was a very silent one. She came to him with both hands outstretched, and took his own and held them awhile, looking up at him in a kindly, motherly manner. She had elongated her florid, humorous face to a degree that was almost comical, and the pair might have passed, in their speechless solemnity, for acquaintances meeting in a house in which a funeral was about to take place. It was indeed a house on which death had descended, as he very soon learned, from Madame Grandoni's expression; something had perished there forever, and he might proceed to bury it as soon as he liked. His wife's ancient German friend, however, was not a person to keep up a manner of that sort very long, and when, after she had made him sit down on the sofa beside her, she shook her head, slowly and definitely, several times, it was with a face in which a more genial appreciation of the circumstances had already begun to appear.

"Never — never — never?" said the Prince, in a deep, hoarse voice, which was at variance with his aristocratic slimness. He had much of the aspect which, in late-coming members of long-descended races, we qualify to-day as effete; but his speech might have been the speech of some deep-chested fighting ancestor.

"Surely you know your wife as well as I," she replied, in Italian, which she evidently spoke with facility, although with a strong guttural accent. "I have been talking with her: that is what has made me keep you. I have urged her to see you. I have told her that this could do no harm and would pledge her to nothing. But you know your wife," Madame Grandoni repeated, with a smile which was now distinctly facetious.

Prince Casamassima looked down at his boots. "How can one ever know a person like that? I hoped she would see me for five minutes."

"For what purpose? Have you anything to propose?"

"For what purpose? To rest my eyes on her beautiful face."

"Did you come to England for that?"

"For what else should I have come?" the Prince inquired, turning his blighted gaze to the opposite side of South Street.

"In London, such a day as this, gia," said the old lady, sympathetically. "I am very sorry for you; but if I had known you were coming, I would have written to you that you might spare yourself the pain."

The Prince gave a low, interminable sigh. "You ask me what I wish to propose. What I wish to propose is that my wife does not kill me inch by inch."

"She would be much more likely to do that if you lived with her!" Madame Grandoni cried.

"Cam signora, she doesn't appear to have killed you," the melancholy nobleman rejoined.

"Oh, me? I am past killing. I am as hard as a stone. I went through my miseries long ago; I suffered what you have not had to suffer; I wished for death many times, and I survived it all. Our troubles don't kill us, Prince; it is we who must try to kill them. I have buried not a few. Besides, Christina is fond of me, God knows why!" Madame Grandoni added.

"And you are so good to her," said the Prince, laying his hand on her plump, wrinkled fist.

"Che vuole?

I have known her so long. And she has some such great qualities."

"Ah, to whom do you say it?" And Prince Casamassima gazed at his boots again, for some moments, in silence.

Suddenly he inquired, "How does she look to-day?"

"She always looks the same: like an angel who came down from heaven yesterday, and has been rather disappointed in her first day upon earth!"

The Prince was evidently a man of a simple nature, and Madame Grandoni's rather violent metaphor took his fancy. His face lighted up for a moment, and he replied with eagerness, "Ah, she is the only woman I have ever seen whose beauty never for a moment falls below itself. She has no bad days. She's so handsome when she's angry!"

"She is very handsome to-day, but she is not angry," said the old lady. "Not when my name was announced?"

"I was not with her then; but when she sent for me, and asked me to see you, it was quite without passion. And even when I argued with her, and tried to persuade her (and she doesn't like that, you know), she was still perfectly quiet."

"She hates me, she despises me too much, eh?"

"How can I tell, dear Prince, when she never mentions you?"

"Never, never?"

"That's better than if she railed at you, and abused you."

"You mean it should give me more hope for the future?" the young man asked, quickly.

Madame Grandoni hesitated a moment. "I mean it's better for me," she answered, with a laugh, of which the friendly ring covered as much as possible her equivocation.

"Ah, you like me enough to care," he murmured, turning on her his sad, grateful eyes.

"I am very sorry for you. Ma che vuole?"

The Prince had, apparently, nothing to suggest, and he only exhaled, in reply, another gloomy groan. Then he inquired whether his wife pleased herself in that country, and whether she intended to pass the summer in London. Would she remain long in England, and — might he take the liberty to ask? — what were her plans? Madame Grandoni explained that the Princess had found the British metropolis much more to her taste than one might have expected, and that, as for plans, she had as many, or as few, as she had always had. Had he ever known her to carry out any arrangement, or to do anything, of any kind, she had selected or determined upon? She always, at the last moment, did the other thing, the one that had been out of the question; and it was for that that Madame Grandoni, herself, privately, made her preparations. Christina, now that everything was over, would leave London from one day to the other; but they should not know where they were going until they arrived. The old lady concluded by asking the Prince if he himself liked England. He thrust forward his thick lips.

" How can I like anything? Besides, I have been here before: I have friends," he said.

His companion perceived that he had more to say to her, to extract from her, but that he was hesitating, nervously, because he feared to incur some warning, some rebuff, with which his dignity — which, in spite of his position of discomfiture, was really very great — might find it difficult to square itself. He looked vaguely round the room, and presently he remarked, "I wanted to see for myself how she is living."

"Yes, that is very natural."

"I have heard — I have heard" — and Prince Casamassima stopped.

"You have heard great rubbish, I have no doubt." Madame Grandoni watched him, as if she foresaw what was coming.

"She spends a terrible deal of money," said the young man.

"Indeed she does." The old lady knew that, careful as he was of his very considerable property, which at one time had required much nursing, his wife's prodigality was not what lay heaviest on his mind. She also knew that, expensive and luxurious as Christina might be, she had never yet exceeded the income settled upon her by the Prince at the time of their separation — an income determined wholly by himself, and his estimate of what was required to maintain the social consequence of his name, for which he had a boundless reverence. "She thinks she is a model of thrift — that she counts every shilling," Madame Grandoni continued. "If there is a virtue she prides herself upon, it's her economy. Indeed, it's the only thing for which she takes any credit."

"I wonder if she knows that I" — the Prince hesitated a moment, then he went on— "that I spend really nothing. But I would rather live on dry bread than that, in a country like this, in this English society, she should not make a proper appearance."

"Her appearance is all you could wish. How can it help being proper, with me to set her off?"

"You are the best thing she has, dear lady. So long as you are with her, I feel a certain degree of security; and one of the things I came for was to extract from you a promise that you won't leave her."

"Ah, let us not tangle ourselves up with promises!" Madame Grandoni exclaimed. "You know the value of any engagement one may take with regard to the Princess; it's like promising you I will stay in the bath when the hot water is turned on. When I begin to be scalded, I have to jump out! I will stay while I can; but I shouldn't stay if she were to do certain things." Madame Grandoni uttered these last words very gravely, and for a minute she and her companion looked deep into each other's eyes.

"What things do you mean?"

"I can't say what things. It is utterly impossible to predict, on any occasion, what Christina will do. She is capable of giving us great surprises. The things I mean are things I should recognize as soon as I saw them, and they would make me leave the house on the instant."

"So that if you have not left it yet" — the Prince asked, in a low tone, with extreme eagerness.

"It is because I have thought I may do some good by staying."

The young man seemed only half satisfied with this answer; nevertheless, he said, in a moment, "To me it makes all the difference. And if anything of the kind you speak of should happen, that would be only the greater reason for your staying — that you might interpose, that you might arrest" — He stopped short; Madame Grandoni was laughing, with her Teutonic homeliness, in his face.

"You must have been in Rome, more than once, when the Tiber had overflowed, e vero? What would you have thought then, if you had heard people telling the poor wretches in the Ghetto, on the Ripetta, up to their knees in liquid mud, that they ought to interpose, to arrest?"

"Capisco bene," said the Prince, dropping his eyes. He appeared to have closed them, for some moments, as if a slow spasm of pain were passing through him. "I can't tell you what torments me most," he presently went on, "the thought that sometimes makes my heart rise into my mouth. It '& a haunting fear." And his pale face and distended eyes might indeed have been those of a man before whom some horrible spectre had risen.

"You needn't tell me. I know what you mean, my poor friend."

"Do you think, then, there is a danger — that she will drag my name, do what no one has ever dared to do? That I would never forgive," said the young man, almost under his breath; and the hoarseness of his whisper lent a great effect to the announcement.

Madame Grandoni wondered for a moment whether she had not better tell him (as it would prepare him for the worst) that his wife cared about as much for his name as for the sediment in her teapot; but after an instant's reflection, she reserved this information for another hour. Besides, as she said to herself, the Prince

ought already to know, perfectly, to what extent Christina attached the idea of an obligation or an interdict to her ill-starred connection with an ignorant and superstitious Italian race, whom she despised for their provinciality, their parsimony, and their tiresomeness (she thought their talk the climax of puerility), and whose fatuous conception of their importance in the great modern world she had on various public occasions sufficiently covered with her derision. The old lady finally contented herself with remarking, “Dear Prince, your wife is a very proud woman.”

“Ah, how could my wife be anything else? But her pride is not my pride. And she has such ideas, such opinions! Some of them are monstrous!”

Madame Grandoni smiled. “She doesn’t think it so necessary to have them when you are not there.”

“Why then do you say that you enter into my fears — that you recognize the stories I have heard?”

I know not whether the good lady lost patience with his persistence; at all events, she broke out, with a certain sharpness, “Understand this — understand this: Christina will never consider you — your name, your illustrious traditions — in any case in which she doesn’t consider, much more, herself!”

The Prince appeared to study, for a moment, this somewhat ambiguous yet portentous phrase; then he slowly got up, with his hat in his hand, and walked about the room, softly, solemnly, as if he were suffering from his long, thin feet. He stopped before one of the windows, and took another survey of South Street; then, turning, he suddenly inquired, in a voice into which he had evidently endeavored to infuse a colder curiosity, “Is she admired in this place? Does she see many people.”

“She is thought very strange, of course. But she sees whom she likes. And they mostly bore her to death!” Madame Grandoni added, with a laugh.

“Why then do you tell me this country pleases her?”

Madame Grandoni left her place. She had promised Christina, who detested the sense of being under the same roof with her husband, that the Prince’s visit should be kept within narrow limits; and this movement was intended to signify, as kindly as possible, that it had better terminate. “It is the common people that please her,” she replied, with her hands folded on her crumpled satin stomach, and her humorous eyes raised to his face. “It is the lower orders, the basso popolo.”

“The basso popolo?” The Prince stared, at this fantastic announcement.

“The povera gente,” pursued the old lady, laughing at his amazement.

“The London mob — the most horrible, the most brutal “ —

“Oh, she wishes to raise them.”

“After all, something like that is no more than I had heard,” said the Prince gravely.

“Che vuole?

Don’t trouble yourself; it won’t be for long!”

Madame Grandoni saw that this comforting assurance was lost upon him; his face was turned to the door of the room, which had been thrown open, and all his attention was given to the person who crossed the threshold. Madame Grandoni transferred her own to the same quarter, and recognized the little artisan whom Christina had, in a manner so extraordinary and so profoundly characteristic, drawn into her box that night at the theatre, and whom she had since told her old friend she had sent for to come and see her.

“Mr. Robinson!” the butler, who had had a lesson, announced, in a, loud, colorless tone.

“It won’t be for long,” Madame Grandoni repeated, for the Prince’s benefit; but it was to Mr. Robinson the words had the air of being addressed.

He stood there, while Madame Grandoni signaled to the servant to leave the door open and wait, looking from the queer old lady, who was as queer as before, to the tall foreign gentleman (he recognized his foreignness at a glance), whose eyes seemed to challenge him, to devour him; wondering whether he had made some mistake, and needing to remind himself that he had the Princess’s note in his pocket, with the day and hour as clear as her magnificent handwriting could make them.

“Good-morning, good-morning. I hope you are well,” said Madame Grandoni, with quick friendliness, but turning her back upon him at the same time, to ask of the Prince, in Italian, as she extended her hand, “And do you not leave London soon — in a day or two?”

The Prince made no answer; he still scrutinized the little bookbinder from head to foot, as if he were wondering who the deuce he could be. His eyes seemed to Hyacinth to search for the small, neat bundle he ought to have had under his arm, and without which he was incomplete. To the reader, however, it may be confided that, dressed more carefully than he had ever been in his life before, stamped with that extraordinary transformation which the British Sunday often operates in the person of the wage-earning cockney, with his handsome head uncovered and suppressed excitement in his brilliant little face, the young man from Lomax Place might have passed for anything rather than a carrier of parcels. “The Princess wrote to me, madam, to come and see her,” he remarked, as a precaution, in case he should have incurred the reproach of bad taste.

“Oh, yes, I dare say;” and Madame Grandoni guided the Prince to the door, with an expression of the hope that he would have a comfortable journey back to Italy.

A faint flush had come into his face; he appeared to have satisfied himself on the subject of Mr. Robinson. “I must see you once more — I must — it’s impossible!”

“Ah, well, not in this house, you know.”

“Will you do me the honor to meet me, then?” And as the old lady hesitated, he added, with sudden

passion, “Dearest friend, I entreat you on my knees!” After she had agreed that if he would write to her, proposing a day and place, she would see him, he raised her ancient knuckles to his lips, and, without further notice of Hyacinth, turned away. Madame Grandoni requested the servant to announce the other visitor to the Princess, and then approached Mr. Robinson, rubbing her hands and smiling, with her head on one side. He smiled back at her, vaguely; he didn’t know what she might be going to say. What she said was, to his surprise, —

“My poor young man, may I take the liberty of asking your age?”

“Certainly, madam: I am twenty-four.”

“And I hope you are industrious, and sober, and — what do you call it in English? — steady.”

“I don’t think I am very wild,” said Hyacinth, smiling still. He thought the old woman patronizing, but he forgave her.

“I don’t know how one speaks, in this country, to young men like you. Perhaps one is considered meddling, impertinent.”

“I like the way you speak,” Hyacinth interposed.

She stared, and then, with a humorous affectation of dignity, replied, “You are very good. I am glad it amuses you. You are evidently intelligent and clever,” she went on, “and if you are disappointed it will be a pity.”

“How do you mean, if I am disappointed?” Hyacinth looked more grave.

“Well, I dare say you expect great things, when you come into a house like this. You must tell me if I wound you. I am very old-fashioned, and I am not of this country. I speak as one speaks to young men, like you, in other places.”

“I am not so easily wounded!” Hyacinth exclaimed, with a flight of imagination. “To expect anything, one must know something, one must understand: isn’t it so? And I am here without knowing, without understanding. I have come only because a lady, who seems to me very beautiful and very kind, has done me the honor to send for me.”

Madame Grandoni examined him a moment, as if she were struck by his good looks, by something delicate that was stamped upon him everywhere. “I can see you are very clever, very intelligent; no, you are not like the young men I mean. All the more reason” — And she paused, giving a little sigh. “I want to warn you a little, and I don’t know how. If you were a young Roman, it would be different.”

“A young Roman?”

“That’s where I live, properly, in Rome. If I hurt you, you can explain it that way. No, you are not like them.”

“You don’t hurt me — please believe that; you interest me very much,” said Hyacinth, to whom it did not occur that he himself might appear patronizing. “Of what do you want to warn me?”

“Well — only to advise you a little. Do not give up anything.”

“What can I give up?”

“Do not give up yourself. I say that to you in your interest. I think you have some trade — I forget what; but whatever it may be, remember that to do it well is the best thing — it is better than paying visits, better even than a Princess!”

“Ah, yes, I see what you mean!” Hyacinth exclaimed, exaggerating a little. “I am very fond of my trade, I assure you.”

“I am delighted to hear it. Hold fast to it, then, and be quiet; be diligent, and honest, and good. I gathered the other night that you are one of the young men who want everything changed — I believe there are a great many in Italy, and also in my own dear old Deutschland — and even think it’s useful to throw bombs into innocent crowds, and shoot pistols at their rulers, or at any one. I won’t go into that. I might seem to be speaking for myself, and the fact is that for myself I don’t care; I am so old that I may hope to spend the few days that are left me without receiving a bullet. But before you go any further, please think a little whether you are right.”

“It isn’t just that you should impute to me ideas which I may not have,” said Hyacinth, turning very red, but taking more and more of a fancy, all the same, to Madame Grandoni. “You talk at your ease about our ways and means, but if we were only to make use of those that you would like to see “ — And, while he blushed, smiling, the young man shook his head two or three times, with great significance.

“I shouldn’t like to see any!” the old lady cried. “I like people to bear their troubles as one has done one’s self. And as for injustice, you see how kind I am to you when I say to you again, “Don’t, don’t give anything up. I will tell them to send you some tea,” she added, as she took her way out of the room, presenting to him her round, low, aged back, and dragging over the carpet a scanty and lustreless train.

Chapter XVII

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HYACINTH had been warned by Mr. Vetch as to what brilliant women might do with him (it was only a word

on the old fiddler's life, but the word had had a point), he had been warned by Paul Muniment, and now he was admonished by a person supremely well placed for knowing — a fact that could not fail to deepen the emotion which, any time these three days, had made him draw his breath more quickly. That emotion, however, was now not of a kind to make him fear remote consequences; as he looked over the Princess Casamassima's drawingroom, and inhaled an air that seemed to him inexpressibly delicate and sweet, he hoped that his adventure would throw him upon his mettle only half as much as the old lady had wished to intimate. He considered, one after the other, the different chairs, couches, and ottomans the room contained — he wished to treat himself to the most sumptuous — and then, for reasons he knew best, sank into a seat covered with rose-colored brocade, of which the legs and frame appeared to be of pure gold. Here he sat perfectly still, with only his heart beating very sensibly, and his eyes coursing, again and again, from one object to another. The splendors and suggestions of Captain Sholto's apartment were thrown completely into the shade by the scene before him, and as the Princess did not scruple to keep him waiting for twenty minutes (during which the butler came in and set out, on a small table, a glittering tea-service) Hyacinth had time to count over the innumerable bibelots (most of which he had never dreamed of) involved in the personality of a woman of high fashion, and to feel that their beauty and oddity revealed not only whole provinces of art, but refinements of choice, on the part of their owner, complications of mind, and — almost — terrible depths of character.

When at last the door opened, and the servant, reappearing, threw it far back, as if to make a wide passage for a person of the importance of his mistress, Hyacinth's suspense became very acute; it was much the same feeling with which, at the theatre, he had sometimes awaited the entrance of a celebrated actress. In this case the actress was to perform for him alone. There was still a moment before she came on, and when she did so she was so simply dressed — besides his seeing her now on her feet — that she looked like a different person. She approached him rapidly, and a little stiffly and shyly, but in the manner in which she shook hands with him there was an evident desire to be frank, and even fraternal. She looked like a different person, but that person had a beauty even more radiant; the fairness of her face shone forth at our young man as if to dissipate any doubts that might have crept over him as to the reality of the vision bequeathed to him by his former interview. And in this brightness and richness of her presence lie could not have told you whether she struck him as more proud or more kind.

"I have kept you a long time, but it's supposed not, usually, to be a bad place, my salon; there are various things to look at, and perhaps you have noticed them. Over on that side, for instance, there is rather a curious collection of miniatures." She spoke abruptly, quickly, as if she were conscious that their communion might be awkward, and she were trying to strike, instantly (to conjure that element away), the sort of note that would make them both most comfortable. Quickly, too, she sat down before her tea-tray and poured him out a cup, which she handed him without asking whether he would have it. He accepted it with a trembling hand, though he had no desire for it; he was too nervous to swallow the tea, but it would not have occurred to him that it was possible to decline. When he had murmured that he had indeed looked at all her things, but that it would take hours to do justice to such treasures, she asked if he were fond of works of art; adding, however, immediately, that she was afraid he had not many opportunities of seeing them, though, of course, there were the public collections, open to all. Hyacinth said, with perfect veracity, that some of the happiest moments of his life had been spent at the British Museum and the National Gallery, and this reply appeared to interest her greatly, so that she immediately begged him to tell her what he thought of certain pictures and antiques. In this way it was that, in an incredibly short space of time, as it appeared to him, he found himself discussing the Bacchus and Ariadne and the Elgin marbles with "the most remarkable woman in Europe." It is true that she herself talked most, passing precipitately from one point to another, asking him questions and not waiting for answers; describing and qualifying things, expressing feelings, by the aid of phrases that he had never heard before, but which seemed to him illuminating and happy — as when, for instance, she asked what art was, after all, but a synthesis made in the interest of pleasure, or said that she didn't like England at all, but loved it. It did not occur to him to think these discriminations pedantic. Suddenly she remarked, "Madame Grandoni told me you saw my husband."

"Ah, was the gentleman your husband?"

"Unfortunately! What do you think of him?"

"Oh, I can't think" — Hyacinth murmured.

"I wish I couldn't, either! I haven't seen him for nearly three years. He wanted to see me to-day, but I refused."

"Ah!" said Hyacinth, staring, and not knowing how he ought to receive so unexpected a confidence. Then, as the suggestions of inexperience are sometimes the happiest of all, he spoke simply what was in his mind, and said, gently, "It has made you very nervous." Afterwards, when he had left the house, he wondered how, at that stage, he could have ventured on such a familiar remark.

The Princess took it with a quick, surprised laugh. "How do you know that?" But before he had time to tell how, she added, "Your saying that — that way — shows me how right I was to ask you to come to see me. You know, I hesitated. It shows me you have perceptions; I guessed as much the other night at the theatre. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have asked you. I may be wrong, but I like people who understand what one says to them, and also what one doesn't say."

“Don’t think I understand too much. You might easily exaggerate that,” Hyacinth declared, conscientiously.

“You confirm, completely, my first impression,” the Princess returned, smiling in a way that showed him he really amused her. “We shall discover the limits of your comprehension! I am atrociously nervous. But it will pass. How is your friend the dressmaker?” she inquired, abruptly. And when Hyacinth had briefly given some account of poor Pinnie — told her that she was tolerably well for her, but old and tired and sad, and not very successful — she exclaimed, impatiently, “Ah, well, she’s not the only one!” and came back, with irrelevance, to the former question. “It’s not only my husband’s visit — absolutely unexpected! — that has made me fidgety, but the idea that, now you have been so kind as to come here, you may wonder why, after all, I made such a point of it, and even think any explanation I might be able to give you entirely insufficient.”

“I don’t want any explanation,” said Hyacinth.

“It’s very nice of you to say that, and I shall take you at your word. Explanations usually make things worse. All the same, I don’t want you to think (as you might have done so easily the other evening) that I wish only to treat you as a curious animal.”

“I don’t care how you treat me!” said Hyacinth, smiling.

There was a considerable silence, after which the Princess remarked, “All I ask of my husband is to let me alone. But he won’t. He won’t reciprocate my indifference.”

Hyacinth asked himself what reply he ought to make to such an announcement as that, and it seemed to him that the least civility demanded was that he should say — as he could with such conviction— “It can’t be easy to be indifferent to you.”

“Why not, if I am odious? I can be — oh, there is no doubt of that! However, I can honestly say that with the Prince I have been exceedingly reasonable, and that most of the wrongs — the big ones, those that settled the question — have been on his side. You may tell me, of course, that that’s the pretension of every woman who has made a mess of her marriage. But ask Madame Grandoni.”

“She will tell me it’s none of my business.”

“Very true — she might!” the Princess admitted, laughing. “And I don’t know, either, why I should talk to you about my domestic affairs; except that I have been wondering what I could do to show confidence in you, in return for your showing so much in me. As this matter of my separation from my husband happens to have been turned uppermost by his sudden descent upon me, I just mention it, though the subject is tiresome enough. Moreover, I ought to let you know that I have very little respect for distinctions of class — the sort of thing they make so much of in this country. They are doubtless convenient in some ways, but when one has a reason — a reason of feeling — for overstepping them, and one allows one’s self to be deterred by some dreary superstition about one’s place, or some one else’s place, then I think it’s ignoble. It always belongs to one’s place not to be a poor creature. I take it that if you are a socialist you think about this as I do; but lest, by chance, as the sense of those differences is the English religion, it may have rubbed off even on you, though I am more and more impressed with the fact that you are scarcely more British than I am; lest you should, in spite of your theoretic democracy, be shocked at some of the applications that I, who cherish the creed, am capable of making of it, let me assure you without delay that in that case we shouldn’t get on together at all, and had better part company before we go further.” She paused, long enough for Hyacinth to declare, with a great deal of emphasis, that he was not easily shocked; and then, restlessly, eagerly, as if it relieved her to talk, and made their queer interview less abnormal that she should talk most, she arrived at the point that she wanted to know the people, and know them intimately — the toilers and strugglers and sufferers — because she was convinced they were the most interesting portion of society, and at the inquiry, “What could possibly be in worse taste than for me to carry into such an undertaking a pretension of greater delicacy and finer manners? If I must do that,” she continued, “it’s simpler to leave them alone. But I can’t leave them alone; they press upon me, they haunt me, they fascinate me. There it is (after all, it’s very simple): I want to know them, and I want you to help me!”

“I will help you with pleasure, to the best of my humble ability. But you will be awfully disappointed,” Hyacinth said. Very strange it seemed to him that within so few days two ladies of rank should have found occasion to express to him the same mysterious longing. A breeze from a thoroughly unexpected quarter was indeed blowing over the aristocracy. Nevertheless, though there was much of the accent of passion in the Princess Casamassima’s communication that there had been in Lady Aurora’s, and though he felt bound to discourage his present interlocutress, as he had done the other, the force that pushed her struck him as a very different mixture from the shy, conscientious, anxious heresies of Rose Muniment’s friend. The temper varied in the two women as much as the face and the manner, and that perhaps made their curiosity the more significant.

“I haven’t the least doubt of it: there is nothing in life-in which I have not been awfully disappointed. But disappointment for disappointment, I shall like it better than some others. You’ll not persuade me, either, that among the people I speak of, characters and passions and motives are not more natural, more complete, more naif. The upper classes are so insipid! My husband traces his descent from the fifth century, and he’s the greatest bore on earth. That is the kind of people I was condemned to live with after my marriage. Oh, if you knew what I have been through, you would allow that intelligent mechanics (of course I don’t want to know idiots) would be a pleasant change. I must begin with some one — mustn’t I? — so I began, the other night,

with you!" As soon as she had uttered these words the Princess added a correction, with the consciousness of her mistake in her face. It made that face, to Hyacinth, more nobly, tenderly pure. "The only objection to you, individually, is that you have nothing of the people about you — to-day not even the dress." Her eyes wandered over him from head to foot, and their friendly beauty made him ashamed. "I wish you had come in the clothes you wear at your work!"

"You see you do regard me as a curious animal," he answered.

It was perhaps to contradict this that, after a moment, she began to tell him more about her domestic affairs. He ought to know who she was, unless Captain Sholto had told him; and she related her parentage — American on the mother's side, Italian on the father's — and how she had led, in her younger years, a wandering, Bohemian life, in a thousand different places (always in Europe; she had never been in America and knew very little about it, though she wanted greatly to cross the Atlantic), and largely, at one period, in Rome. She had been married by her people, in a mercenary way, for the sake of a fortune and a title, and it had turned out as badly as her worst enemy could wish. Her parents were dead, luckily for them, and she had no one near her of her own except Madame Grandoni, who belonged to her only in the sense that she had known her as a girl; was an association of her — what should she call them? — her innocent years. Not that she had ever been very innocent; she had had a horrible education. However, she had known a few good people — people she respected, then; but Madame Grandoni was the only one who had stuck to her. She, too, was liable to leave her any day; the Princess appeared to intimate that her destiny might require her to take some step which would test severely the old lady's adhesive property. It would detain her too long to make him understand the stages by which she had arrived at her present state of mind: her disgust with a thousand social arrangements; her rebellion against the selfishness, the corruption, the iniquity, the cruelty, the imbecility, of the people who, all over Europe, had the upper hand. If he could have seen her life, the milieu in which, for several years, she had been condemned to move, the evolution of her opinions (Hyacinth was delighted to hear her use that term) would strike him as perfectly logical. She had been humiliated, outraged, tortured; she considered that she too was one of the numerous class who could be put on a tolerable footing only by a revolution. At any rate, she had some self-respect left, and there was still more that she wanted to recover; the only way to arrive at that was to throw herself into some effort which would make her forget her own affairs and comprehend the troubles and efforts of others. Hyacinth listened to her with a wonderment which, as she went on, was transformed into fascinated submission; she seemed so natural, so vivid, so exquisitely generous and sincere. By the time he had been with her for half an hour she had made the situation itself appear natural and usual, and a third person who should have joined them at this moment would have observed nothing to make him suppose that friendly social intercourse between little bookbinders and Neapolitan princesses was not, in London, a matter of daily occurrence.

Hyacinth had seen plenty of women who chattered about themselves and their affairs — a vulgar garrulity of confidence was indeed a leading characteristic of the sex as he had hitherto learned to know it — but he was quick to perceive that the great lady who took the trouble to open herself to him was not of a gossiping habit; that she must be, on the contrary, as a general thing, proudly, ironically, reserved, even to the point of passing, with many people, for a model of the unsatisfactory. It was very possible she was capricious; yet the fact that her present sympathies and curiosities might be a caprice wore, in Hyacinth's eyes, no sinister aspect. Why was it not a noble and interesting whim, and why might he not stand, for the hour at any rate, in the silvery moonshine it threw upon his path? It must be added that he was far from understanding everything she said, and some of her allusions and implications were so difficult to seize that they mainly served to reveal to him the limits of his own acquaintance with life. Her words evoked all sorts of shadowy suggestions of things he was condemned not to know, touching him most when he had not the key to them. This was especially the case with her reference to her career in Italy, on her husband's estates, and her relations with his family;. who considered that they had done her a great honor in receiving her into their august circle (putting the best face on a bad business), after they had moved heaven and earth to keep her out of it. The position made for her among these people, and what she had had to suffer from their family tone, their opinions and customs (though what these might be remained vague to her listener), had evidently planted in her soul a lasting resentment and contempt; and Hyacinth gathered that the force of reaction and revenge might carry her far, make her modern and democratic and heretical a cutrance, lead her to swear by Darwin and Spencer and the revolutionary spirit. Our young man surely need not have been so sensible of the lacuna in his comprehension of the Princess, when he could already surmise that personal passion had counted for so much in the formation of her views. This induction, however, which had no harshness, did not make her appear to him any the less a creature compounded of the finest elements; brilliant, delicate, complicated, but complicated with something divine. It was not until after he had left her that he became conscious she had forced him to talk, as well as talked herself. He drew a long breath as he reflected that he had not made quite such an ass of himself as might very well have happened; he had been saved by his enjoyment and admiration, which had not gone to his head and prompted him to show that he too, in his improbable little way, was remarkable, but had kept him in a state of anxious, delicious tension, as if the occasion had been a great solemnity. He had said, indeed, much more than he had warrant for, when she questioned him about his socialistic affiliations; he had spoken as if the movement were vast and complicated, whereas, in fact, so far, at least, as he was as yet concerned with it, and could answer for it from personal knowledge, it was circumscribed by the hideously papered walls

of the little club room at the Sun and Moon. He reproached himself with this laxity, but it had not been engendered by vanity.

He was only afraid of disappointing his hostess too much; of making her say, “Why in the world, then, did you come to see me, if you have nothing more remarkable to relate?” — an inquiry to which, of course, he would have had an answer ready, if it had not been impossible to him to say that he had never asked to come; his coming was her own affair. He wanted too much to come a second time to have the courage to make that speech. Nevertheless, when she exclaimed, changing the subject, abruptly, as she always did, from something else they had been talking about, “I wonder whether I shall ever see you again!” he replied, with perfect sincerity, that it was very difficult for him to believe anything so delightful could be repeated. There were some kinds of happiness that to many people never came at all, and to others could come only once. He added, “It is very true I had just that feeling after I left you the other night at the theatre. And yet here I am!”

“Yes, there you are,” said the Princess, thoughtfully, as if this might be a still graver and more embarrassing fact than she had yet supposed it. “I take it there is nothing essentially impossible in my seeing you again; but it may very well be that you will never again find it so pleasant. Perhaps that’s the happiness that comes but once. At any rate, you know, I am going away.”

“Oh yes, of course; every one leaves town,” Hyacinth commented, sagaciously.

“Do you, Mr. Robinson?” asked the Princess.

“Well, I don’t as a general thing. Nevertheless, it is possible that, this year, I may get two or three days at the seaside. I should like to take my old lady. I have clone it before.”

“And except for that you will be always at work?”

“Yes; but you must understand that I like my work. You must understand that it’s a great blessing for a young fellow like me to have it.”

“And if you didn’t have it, what would you do? Should you starve?”

“Oh, I don’t think I should starve,” the young man replied, judicially.

The Princess looked a little chagrined, but after a moment she remarked, “I wonder whether you would come to see me, in the country, somewhere.”

“Oh, dear!” Hyacinth exclaimed, catching his breath. “You are so kind, I don’t know what to do.”

“Don’t be banal, please. That’s what other people are. What’s the use of my looking for something fresh in other walks of life, if you are going to be banal, too? I ask you, would you come?”

Hyacinth hesitated a moment. “Yes, I think I would come. I don’t know, at all, how I should do it — there would be several obstacles; but wherever you should call for me, I would come.”

“You mean you can’t leave your work, like that; you might lose it, if you did, and be in want of money and much embarrassed?”

“Yes, there would be little difficulties of that kind. You see that immediately, in practice, great obstacles come up, when it’s a question of a person like you making friends with a person like me.”

“That’s the way I like you to talk,” said the Princess, with a pitying gentleness that seemed to her visitor quite sacred. “After all. I don’t know where I shall be. I have got to pay stupid visits, myself, where the only comfort will be that I shall make the people jump. Every one here thinks me exceedingly odd — as there is no doubt I am! I might be ever so much more so if you would only help me a little. Why shouldn’t I have my bookbinder, after all? In attendance, you know, it would be awfully chic. We might have immense fun, don’t you think so? No doubt it will come. At any rate, I shall return to London when I have got through that corvee; I shall be here next year. In the mean time, don’t forget me,” she went on, rising to her feet. ,” Remember, on the contrary, that I expect you to take me into the slums — into very bad places.” Why the idea of these scenes of misery should have lighted up her face is more than may be explained; but she smiled down at Hyacinth — who, even as he stood up, was of slightly smaller stature — with all her strange, radiant sweetness. Then, in a manner almost equally incongruous, she added a reference to what she had said a moment before: “I recognize, perfectly, the obstacles, in practice, as you call them; but though I am not, by nature, persevering, and am really very easily put off, I don’t consider that they will prove insurmountable. They exist on my side as well, and if you will help me to overcome mine, I will do the same for you, with yours.”

These words, repeating themselves again and again in Hyacinth’s consciousness, appeared to give him wings, to help him to float and soar, as he turned that afternoon out of South Street. He had at home a copy of Tennyson’s poems — a single, comprehensive volume, with a double column on the page, in a tolerably neat condition, though he had handled it much. He took it to pieces that same evening, and during the following week, in his hours of leisure, at home in his little room, with the tools he kept there for private use, and a morsel of delicate, blue-tinted Russia leather, of which he obtained possession at the place in Soho, he devoted himself to the task of binding the book as perfectly as he knew how. He worked with passion, with religion, and produced a masterpiece of firmness and finish, of which his own appreciation was as high as that of M. Poupin, when, at the end of the week, he exhibited the fruit of his toil, and much more freely expressed than that of old Crookenden, who granted approbation, but was always too long-headed to create precedents. Hyacinth carried the volume to South Street, as an offering to the Princess; hoping she would not yet have left London, in which case he would ask the servant to deliver it to her, along with a little note he had sat up all night-to compose. But the majestic butler, in charge of the house, opening the door, yet looking down at him as if from a second-story window, took the life out of his vision, and erected himself as an impenetrable

medium. The Princess had been absent for some days; the butler was so good as to inform the young mail with the parcel that she was on a visit to a “juke,” in a distant part of the country. He offered, however, to receive, and even to forward, anything Hyacinth might wish to leave; but our hero felt a sudden indisposition to launch his humble’ tribute into the vast, the possible cold, unknown of a ducal circle. He decided to retain his little package for the present; he would give it to her when he should see her again, and he turned away without parting with it. Later, it seemed to create a sort of material link between the Princess and himself, and at the end of three months it almost appeared to him, not that the exquisite book was an intended present from his own hand, but that it had been placed in that hand by the most remarkable woman in Europe. Rare sensations and impressions, moments of acute happiness, almost always, with Hyacinth, in retrospect, became rather mythic and legendary; and the superior piece of work he had done, after seeing her last, in the immediate heat of his emotion, turned into a kind of proof and gage, as if a ghost, in vanishing from sight, had left a palpable relic.

Chapter XVIII

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THE MATTER CONCERNED HIM only indirectly, but it may concern the reader more closely to know that before the visit to the duke took place Madame Grandoni granted to Prince Casamassima the private interview she had promised him on that sad Sunday afternoon. She crept out of South Street after breakfast — a repast which under the Princess’s roof was served at twelve o’clock, in the foreign fashion — crossed the sultry solitude into which, at such a season, that precinct resolves itself, and entered the Park, where the grass was already brown and a warm, smoky haze prevailed, a sort of summer edition of what was most characteristic in the London air. The Prince met her, by appointment, at the gate, and they went and sat down together under the trees beside the drive, amid a wilderness of empty chairs, and with nothing to distract their attention from an equestrian or two, left over from the cavalcades of a fortnight before, and whose vain agitation in the saddle the desolate scene seemed to throw into high relief. They remained there for nearly an hour, though Madame Grandoni, in spite of her leaning to friendly interpretations, could not have told herself what comfort it was to the depressed, embarrassed young man at her side. She had nothing to say to him which could better his case, as he bent his mournful gaze on a prospect which was not, after all, perceptibly improved by its not being Sunday, and could only feel that, with her, he must seem to himself to be nearer his wife — to be touching something she had touched. The old lady wished he would resign himself more, but she was willing to minister to that thin illusion, little as she approved of the manner in which he had conducted himself at the time of the last sharp crisis in the remarkable history of his relations with Christina. He had behaved like a spoiled child, with a bad little nature, in a rage; he had been fatally wanting in dignity and wisdom, and had given the Princess an advantage which she took on the spot and would keep forever. He had acted without manly judgment, had put his uncles upon her (as if she cared for his uncles, though one of them was a powerful prelate), had been suspicious and jealous on exactly the wrong occasions — occasions on which such ideas were a gratuitous injury. He had not been clever enough or strong enough to make good his valid rights, and had transferred the whole quarrel to a ground where his wife was far too accomplished a woman not to obtain the appearance of victory. There was another reflection that Madame Grandoni made, as her interview with her dejected friend prolonged itself. She could make it the more freely as, besides being naturally quick and appreciative, she had always, during her Roman career, in the dear old days (mingled with bitterness as they had been for her), lived with artists, archaeologists, ingenious strangers, people who abounded in good talk, threw out ideas and played with them. It came over her that, really, even if things had not come to that particular crisis, Christina’s active, various, ironical mind, with all its audacities and impatiences, could not have tolerated for long the simple dullness of the Prince’s company. The old lady had said to him, on meeting him, “Of course, what you want to know immediately is whether she has sent you a message. No, my poor friend, I must tell you the truth. I asked her for one, but she told me that she had nothing whatever, of any kind, to say to you. She knew I was coming out to see you. I haven’t done so en cachette. She doesn’t like it, but she accepts the necessity, for this once, since you have made the mistake, as she considers it, of approaching her again. We talked about you, last night, after your note came to me — for five minutes: that is, I talked, and Christina was good enough to listen. At the end, she said this (what I shall tell you), with perfect calmness, and the appearance of being the most reasonable woman in the world. She didn’t ask me to repeat it to you, but I do so because it is the only substitute I can offer you for a message. I try to occupy my life, my mind, to create interests, in the odious position in which I find myself; I endeavor to get out of myself, my small personal disappointments and troubles, by the aid of such poor faculties as I possess. There are things in the world more interesting, after all, and I hope to succeed in giving my attention to them. It appears to me not too much to ask that the Prince, on his side, should make the same conscientious effort — and leave me alone!’ Those were your wife’s remarkable words; they are all I have to give you.”

After she had given them Madame Grandoni felt a pang of regret; the Prince turned upon her a” face so white, bewildered, and wounded. It had seemed to her that they might form a wholesome admonition, but it

was now impressed upon her that, as coming from his wife, they were cruel, ant she herself felt almost cruel for having repeated them. What they amounted to was an exquisite taunt of his mediocrity — a mediocrity which was, after all, not a crime. How could the Prince occupy himself, what interests could he create, and what faculties, gracious heaven, did he possess? He was as ignorant as a fish, and as narrow as his hatband. His expression became pitiful; it was as if he dimly measured the insult, felt it more than saw it — felt that he could not plead incapacity without putting the Princess largely in the right. He gazed at Madame Grandoni, his face worked, and for a moment she thought he was going to burst into tears. But he said nothing — perhaps because he was afraid of that — so that suffering silence, during which she gently laid her hand upon his own, remained his only answer. He might, doubtless, do so much he didn't, that when Christina touched upon this she was unanswerable. The old lady changed the subject: told him what a curious country England was, in so many ways; offered information as to their possible movements during the summer and autumn, which, within a day or two, had become slightly clearer. But at last, abruptly, as if he had not heard her, he inquired, appealingly, who the young man was who had come in the day he called, just as he was going.

Madame Grandoni hesitated a moment. "He was the Princess's bookbinder."

"Her bookbinder? Do you mean her lover?"

"Prince, how can you dream she will ever live with you again?" the old lady asked, in reply to this.

"Why, then, does she have him in her drawingroom — announced like an ambassador, carrying a hat ill his hand like mine? Where were his books, his bindings? I shouldn't say this to her," the Prince added, as if the declaration justified him.

"I told you the other clay that she is making studies of the people — the lower orders. The young man you saw is a study." Madame Grandoni could not help laughing out, as she gave her explanation this turn; but her mirth elicited no echo from her interlocutor.

"I have thought that over — over and over; but the more I think the less I understand. Would it be your idea that she is quite crazy? I must tell you I don't care if she is!"

"We are all quite crazy, I think," said Madame Grandoni; "but the Princess no more than the rest of us. No, she must try everything; at present she is trying democracy and socialism."

"Santo Dio!" murmured the young man. "And what do they say here when they see her bookbinder?"

"They haven't seen him, and perhaps they won't. But if they do, it won't matter, because here everything is forgiven. That a person should be singular is all they want. A bookbinder will do as well as anything else."

The Prince mused a while, and then he said, "How can she bear the dirt, the bad smell?"

"I don't know what you are talking about. If you mean the young man you saw at the house (I may tell you, by the way, that it was only the first time he had been there, and that the Princess had only seen him once) — if you mean the little bookbinder, he isn't dirty, especially what we should call. The people of that kind, here, are not like our dear Romans. Every one has a sponge, as big as your head; you can see them in the shops."

"They arc full of gin; their faces are purple," said the Prince; after which he immediately asked, "If she had only seen him once, how could he have come into her drawingroom that way?"

The old lady looked at him with a certain severity. "Believe, at least, what I say, my poor friend! Never forget that this was how you spoiled your affairs most of all — by treating a person (and such a person!) as if, as a matter of course, she lied. Christina has many faults, but she hasn't that one; that's why I can live with her. She will speak the truth always."

It was plainly not agreeable to the Prince to be reminded so sharply of his greatest mistake, and he flushed a little as Madame Grandoni spoke. But he did not admit his error, and she doubted whether he even perceived it. At any rate, he remarked, rather grandly, like a man who has still a good deal to say for himself, "There are things it is better to conceal."

"It all depends on whether you are afraid. Christina never is. Oh, I admit that she is very strange, and when the entertainment of watching her, to see how she will carry out some of her inspirations, is not stronger than anything else, I lose all patience with her. When she doesn' fascinate she can only exasperate. But, as regards yourself, since you are here, and as I may not see you again for a long time, or perhaps ever (at my age — I'm a hundred and twenty!), I may as well give you the key of certain parts of your wife's conduct. It may make it seem to you a little less fantastic. At the bottom, then, of much that she does is the fact that she is ashamed of having married you.

"Less fantastic!" the young man repeated, staring. "You may say that there can be nothing more eccentric than that. But you know — or, if not, it isn' for want of her having told you — that the Princess considers that in the darkest hour of her life she sold herself for a title and a fortune. She regards her doing so as such a horrible piece of frivolity that she can never, for the rest of her days, he serious enough to make up for it."

"Yes, I know that she pretends to have been forced. And does she think she's so serious now?"

"The young man you saw the other day thinks so," said the old woman, smiling. "Sometimes she calls it by another name: she says she has thrown herself with passion into being 'modern.' That sums up the greatest number of things that you and your family are not."

"Yes, we are not, thank God! Dio mio, Dio mio!" groaned the Prince. He seemed so exhausted by his reflections that he remained sitting in his chair after his companion, lifting her crumpled corpulence out of her own, had proposed that they should walk about a little. She had no ill-nature, but she had already noticed that whenever she was with Christina's husband the current of conversation made her, as she phrased it, bump

against him.

After administering these small shocks she always steered away, and now, the Prince having at last got up and offered her his arm, she tried again to talk with him of things he could consider without bitterness. She asked him about the health and habits of his uncles, and he replied, for the moment, with the minuteness which he had been taught that in such a case courtesy demanded; but by the time that, at her request, they had returned to the gate nearest to South Street (she wished him to come no farther) he had prepared a question to which she had not opened the way.

“And who and what, then, is this English captain? About him there is a great deal said.”

“This English captain?”

“Godfrey Gerald Sholto — you see I know a good deal about him,” said the Prince, articulating the English names with difficulty. They had stopped near the gate, on the edge of Park Lane, and a couple of predatory hansoms dashed at them from opposite quarters.

“I thought that was coming, and at bottom it is he that has occupied you most!” Madame Grandoni exclaimed, with a sigh. “But in reality he is the last one you need trouble about; he doesn’ count.”

“Why doesn’ he count?”

“I can’ tell you — except that some people don’, you know. He doesn’ even think he does.”

“Why not, when she receives him always — lets him go wherever she goes?”

“Perhaps that is just the reason. When people give her a chance to get tired of them she takes it rather easily. At any rate, you need n’ be any more jealous of him than you are of me. He’s a convenience, a factotum, but he works without wages.”

“Isn’ he, then, in love with her?”

“Naturally. He has, however, no hope.”

“Ah, poor gentleman!” said the Prince, lugubriously.

“He accepts the situation better than you. He occupies himself — as she has strongly recommended him, in my hearing, to do — with other women.”

“Oh, the brute!” the Prince exclaimed. “At all events, he sees her.”

“Yes, but she doesn’t see him!” laughed Madame Grandoni, as she turned away. When she doesn’t fascinate she can only exasperate. But, as regards yourself, since you are here, and as I may not see you again for a long time, or perhaps ever (at my age — I’m a hundred and twenty!), I may as well give you the key of certain parts of your wife’s conduct. It may make it seem to you a little less fantastic. At the bottom, then, of much that she does is the fact that she is ashamed of having married you.”

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"Yes, but she doesn't see him!" laughed Madame Grandoni, as she turned away.

Chapter XIX

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THE PINK dressing-gown which Pinnie had engaged to make for Rose Muniment became, in Lomax Place, a conspicuous object, supplying poor Amanda with a constant theme for reference to one of the great occasions of her life — her visit to Belgrave Square with Lady Aurora, after their meeting at Rosy's bedside. She described this episode, vividly, to her companion, repeating a thousand times that her ladyship's affability was beyond anything she could have expected. The grandeur of the house in Belgrave Square figured in her recital as something oppressive and fabulous, tempered though it had been by shrouds of brown holland and the nudity of staircases and saloons of which the trappings had been put away. "If it's so noble when they 're out of town, what can it be when they are all there together and everything is out?" she inquired, suggestively; and she permitted herself to be restrictive only on two points, one of which was the state of Lady Aurora's gloves and bonnet-strings. If she had not been afraid to appear to notice the disrepair of these objects, she would have been so happy to offer to do any little mending. "If she would only come to me every week or two, I would keep up her rank for her," said Pinnie, with visions of a needle that positively flashed in the disinterested service of the aristocracy. She added that her ladyship got all dragged out with her long expeditions to Lambeth; she might be in tatters, for all they could do to help her, at the top of those dreadful stairs, with that strange sick creature (she was too unnatural), thinking only of her own finery and talking about her complexion. If she wanted pink, she should have pink; but to Pinnie there was something almost unholy in it, like decking out a corpse, or the next thing to it. This was the other element that left Miss Pynsent cold; it could not be other than difficult for her to enter into the importance her ladyship appeared to attach to those pushing people. The girl was unfortunate, certainly, stuck up there like a kitten on a shelf, but in her ladyship's place she would have found some topic more in keeping, while they walked about under those tremendous gilded ceilings. Lady Aurora, seeing how she was struck, showed her all over the house, carrying the lamp herself, and telling an old woman who was there a kind of housekeeper, with ribbons in her cap, who would have pushed Pinnie out if you could push with your eyes that they would do very well without her. If the pink dressing-gown, in its successive stages of development, filled up the little brown parlor (it was terribly long on the stocks), making such a pervasive rose-colored presence as hadn't been seen there for many a day, this was evidently because it was associated with Lady Aurora, not because it was dedicated to her humble friend.

One day, when Hyacinth came home from his work, Pinnie announced to him, as soon as he entered the room, that her ladyship had been there to look at it — to pass judgment before the last touches were conferred. The dressmaker intimated that in such a case as that her judgment was rather wild, and she had made an embarrassing suggestion about pockets. Whatever could poor Miss Muniment want of pockets, and what had she to put in them? But she had evidently found the garment far beyond anything she expected, and she had been more affable than ever, and had wanted to know about every one in the Place; not in a meddling, prying way, either, like some of those upper-class visitors, but quite as if the poor people were the high ones, and she was afraid her curiosity might be "presumptions." It was in the same discreet spirit that she had invited Amanda to relate her whole history, and had expressed an interest in the career of her young friend.

"She said you had charming manners," Miss Pynsent hastened to remark; "but, before heaven, Hyacinth Robinson, I never mentioned a scrap that it could give you pain that any one should talk about." There was an heroic explicitness in this, on Pinnie's part, for she knew in advance just how Hyacinth would look at her — fixedly, silently, hopelessly, as if she were still capable of tattling horribly (with the idea that her revelations would increase her importance), and putting forward this hollow theory of her supreme discretion to cover it up. His eyes seemed to say, "How can I believe you, and yet how can I prove you are lying? I am very helpless, for I can't prove that without applying to the person to whom your incorrigible folly has probably led you to bring, to throw out mysterious and tantalizing hints. You know, of course, that I would never condescend to that." Pinnie suffered, acutely, from this imputation; yet she exposed herself to it often, because she could never deny herself the pleasure, keener still than her pain, of letting Hyacinth know that he was appreciated, admired, and, for those "charming manners" commended by Lady Aurora, even wondered at; and this kind of interest always appeared to imply a suspicion of his secret — something which, when he expressed to himself the sense of it, he called, resenting it at once and yet finding a certain softness in it, "a beastly attendrissement." When Pinnie went on to say to him that Lady Aurora appeared to feel a certain surprise at

his never yet having come to Belgrave Square for the famous books, he reflected that he must really wait upon her without more delay, if he wished to keep up his reputation for charming manners; and meanwhile he considered much the extreme oddity of this new phase of his life (it had opened so suddenly, from one day to the other) — a phase in which his society should have become indispensable to ladies of high rank, and the obscurity of his condition only an attraction the more. They were taking him up, then, one after the other, and they were even taking up poor Pinnie, as a means of getting at him; so that he wondered, with humorous bitterness, whether it meant that his destiny was really seeking him out — that the aristocracy, recognizing a mysterious affinity (with that fineness of flair for which they were remarkable), were coming to him, to save him the trouble of coming to them.

It was late in the day (the beginning of an October evening), and Lady Aurora was at home. Hyacinth had made a mental calculation of the time at which she would have risen from dinner; the operation of "rising from dinner" having always been, in his imagination, for some reason or other, highly characteristic of the nobility. He was ignorant of the fact that Lady Aurora's principal meal consisted of a scrap of fish and a cup of tea, served on a little stand in the dismantled breakfast-parlor. The door was opened for Hyacinth by the insidious old lady whom Pinnie had described, and who listened to his inquiry, conducted him through the house, and ushered him into her ladyship's presence, without the smallest relaxation of a pair of tightly-closed lips. Hyacinth's hostess was seated in the little breakfast-parlor, by the light of a couple of candles, immersed, apparently, in a collection of tolerably crumpled papers and account-books. She was ciphering, consulting memoranda, taking notes; she had had her head in her hands, and the silky entanglement of her tresses resisted the rapid effort she made to smooth herself down as she saw the little bookbinder come in. The impression of her fingers remained in little rosy streaks on her pink skin. She exclaimed, instantly, "Oh, you have come about the books — it's so very kind of you; "and she hurried him off to another room, to which, as she explained, she had had them brought down, for him to choose from. The effect of this precipitation was to make him suppose, at first, that she might wish him to execute his errand as quickly as possible and take himself off; but he presently perceived that her nervousness, her shyness, were of an order that would always give false ideas. She wanted him to stay, she wanted to talk with him, and she had rushed with him at the books in order to gain time and composure for exercising some subtler art. Hyacinth stayed half an hour, and became more and more convinced that her ladyship was, as he had ventured to pronounce her on the occasion of their last meeting, a regular saint. He was privately a little disappointed in the books, though he selected three or four, as many as he could carry, and promised to come back for others: they denoted, on Lady Aurora's part, a limited acquaintance with French literature and even a certain puerility of taste. There were several volumes of Lamartine and a set of the spurious memoirs of the Marquise de Crequi; but for the rest the little library consisted mainly of Marmontel and Madame de Genlis, the Recit d'une Soeur and the tales of M. Emile Sou-vestre. There were certain members of an intensely modern school, advanced and scientific realists, of whom Hyacinth had heard and on whom he had long desired to put his hand; but, evidently, none of them had ever stumbled into Lady Aurora's candid collection, though she did possess a couple of Balzac's novels, which, by ill-luck, happened to be just those that Hyacinth had read again and again.

There was, nevertheless, something very agreeable to him in the moments he passed in the big, dim, cool, empty house, where, at intervals, monumental pieces of furniture — not crowded and miscellaneous, as he had seen the appurtenances of the Princess — loomed and gleamed, and Lady Aurora's fantastic intonations awakened echoes which gave him a sense of privilege, of rioting, decently, in the absence of jealous influences. She talked again about the poor people in the south of London, and about the Muniments in particular; evidently, the only fault she had to find with these latter was that they were not poor enough — not sufficiently exposed to dangers and privations against which she could step in. Hyacinth liked her for this, even though he wished she would talk of something else — he hardly knew what, unless it was that, like Rose Muniment, he wanted to hear more about Inglefield. He didn't mind, with the poor, going into questions of poverty — it even gave him at times a strange, savage satisfaction — but he saw that in discussing them with the rich the interest must inevitably be less; they could never treat them a fond. Their mistakes and illusions, their thinking they had got hold of the sensations of the destitute when they hadn't at all, would always be more or less irritating. It came over Hyacinth that if he found this want of perspective in Lady Aurora's deep conscientiousness, it would he a queer enough business when he should come to go into the detail of such matters with the Princess Casamassima.

His present hostess said not a word to him about Pinnie, and he guessed that she had an instinctive desire to place him on the footing on which people do not express approbation or surprise at the decency or good-breeding of each other's relatives. He saw that she would always treat him as a gentleman, and that even if he should be basely ungrateful she would never call his attention to the fact that she had done so. He should not have occasion to say to her, as he had said to the Princess, that she regarded him as a curious animal; and it gave him immediately that sense, always so delightful to him, of learning more about life, to perceive there were such different ways (which implied still a good many more) of being a lady of rank. The manner in which Lady Aurora appeared to wish to confer with him on the great problems of pauperism might have implied that he was a benevolent nobleman (Lord Shaftesbury in person), who had endowed many charities, and was noted, in philanthropic schemes, for his practical sense. It was not less present to him that Pinnie might have tattled, put forward his claims to high consanguinity, than it had been when the dressmaker herself descanted on her

ladyship's condescensions; but he remembered now that he too had only just escaped being asinine, when, the other day, he flashed out an allusion to his accursed origin. At all events, he was much touched by the delicacy with which the daughter of the Inglefield comported herself, simply assuming that he was "one of themselves;" and he reflected that if she did know his history (he was sure he might pass twenty years in her society without discovering whether she did or not), this shade of courtesy, this natural tact, coexisting even with extreme awkwardness, illustrated that "best breeding" which he had seen alluded to in novels portraying the aristocracy. The only remark on Lady Aurora's part that savored in the least of looking down at him from a height was when she said, cheerfully, encouragingly, "I suppose that one of these days you will be setting up in business for yourself; "and this was not so cruelly patronizing that he could not reply, with a smile equally free from any sort of impertinence, "Oh dear, no, I shall never do that. I should make a great mess of any attempt to carry on a business. I haven't a particle of that kind of aptitude."

Lady Aurora looked a little surprised; then she said, "Oh, I see; you don't like — you don't like" — She hesitated: he saw she was going to say that he didn't like the idea of going in, to that extent, for a trade; but he stopped her in time from attributing to him a sentiment so foolish, and declared that what he meant was simply that the only faculty he possessed was the faculty of doing his little piece of work, whatever it was, of liking to do it skillfully and prettily, and of liking still better to get his money for it when it was done. His conception of "business," or of rising in the world, didn't go beyond that. "Oh, yes, I can fancy!" her ladyship exclaimed; but she looked at him a moment with eyes which showed that he puzzled her, that she didn't quite understand his tone. Before he went away she inquired of him, abruptly (nothing had led up to it), what he thought of Captain Sholto, whom she had seen, that other evening, in Audley Court. Didn't Hyacinth think he was very odd? Hyacinth confessed to this impression; whereupon Lady Aurora went on anxiously, eagerly: "Don't you consider that — that — he is decidedly vulgar?"

"How can I know?"

"You can know perfectly — as well as any one!" Then she added, "I think it -s a pity they should — a — form relations with anyone of that kind."

"They," of course, meant Paul Muniment and his sister. "With a person that may be vulgar?" Hyacinth asked, regarding this solicitude as exquisite. "But think of the people they know — think of those they are surrounded with — think of all Audley Court!"

"The poor, the unhappy, the laboring-classes? Oh, I don't call them vulgar!" cried her ladyship, with radiant eyes. The young man, lying awake a good deal that night, laughed to himself, on his pillow, not unkindly, at her fear that he and his friends would be contaminated by the familiar of a princess. He even wondered whether she would not find the Princess herself rather vulgar.

Chapter XX

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IT MUST NOT be supposed that Hyacinth's relations with Millicent Henning had remained unaffected by the remarkable incident she had witnessed at the theatre. It had made a great impression on the young lady from Pimlico; he never saw her, for several weeks afterwards, that she had not an immense deal to say about it; and though it suited her to take the line of being shocked at the crudity of such proceedings, and of denouncing the Princess for a bold-faced foreigner, of a kind to which any one who knew anything of what could go on in London would give a wide berth, it was easy to see that she was pleased at being brought even into roundabout contact with a person so splendid, and at finding her own discriminating approval of Hyacinth confirmed in such high quarters. She professed to derive her warrant for her low opinion of the lady in the box from information given her by Captain Sholto as he sat beside her — information of which at different moments she gave a different version; her anecdotes having nothing in common, at least, save that they were alike unflattering to the Princess. Hyacinth had many doubts of the captain's pouring such confidences into Miss Henning's ear; under the circumstances it would be such a very unnatural thing for him to do. He was unnatural — that was true — and he might have told Millicent, who was capable of having plied him with questions, that his distinguished friend was separated from her husband; but, for the rest, it was more probable that the girl had given the rein to a certain inventive faculty which she had already showed him she possessed, when it was a question of exercising her primitive, half-childish, half-plebeian impulse of destruction, the instinct of pulling down what was above her, the reckless energy that would, precisely, make her so effective in revolutionary scenes. Hyacinth (it has been mentioned) did not consider that Millicent was false, and it struck him as a proof of positive candor that she should make up absurd, abusive stories about a person concerning whom she knew nothing at all, save that she disliked her, and could not hope for esteem, or, indeed, for recognition of any kind, in return. When people were really false you didn't know where you stood with them, and on such a point as this Miss Henning could never be accused of leaving you in obscurity. She said little else about the captain, and did not pretend to repeat the remainder of his conversation; taking it with an air of grand indifference when Hyacinth amused himself with repaying her strictures on his new acquaintance by drawing a sufficiently derisive portrait of hers.

He took the ground that Sholto's admiration for the high-colored beauty in the second balcony had been at the bottom of the whole episode: he had persuaded the Princess to pretend she was a socialist, and should like, therefore, to confer with Hyacinth, in order that he might slip into the seat of this too easily deluded youth. At the same time, it never occurred to our young man to conceal the fact that the lady in the box had followed him up; he contented himself with saying that this had been no part of the original plot, but a simple result — not unnatural, after all — of his turning out so much more fascinating than one might have supposed. He narrated, with sportive variations, his visit in South Street, and felt that he would never feel the need, with his childhood's friend, of glossing over that sort of experience. She might make him a scene of jealousy and welcome — there were things that would have much more terror for him than that; her jealousy, with its violence, its energy, even a certain inconsequent, dare-devil humor that played through it, entertained him, illustrated the frankness, the passion and pluck, that he admired her for. He should never be on the footing of sparing Miss Henning's susceptibilities; how fond she might really be of him he could not take upon himself to say, but her affection would never take the form of that sort of delicacy, and their intercourse was plainly foredoomed to be an exchange of thumps and concussions, of sarcastic shouts and mutual defis. He liked her, at bottom, strangely, absurdly; but after all it was only well enough to torment her — she could bear so much — not well enough to spare her. Of there being any justification of her jealousy of the Princess he never thought; it could not occur to him to weigh against each other the sentiments he might excite in such opposed bosoms, or those that the spectacle of either emotion might have kindled in his own. He had, no doubt, his share of fatuity, but he found himself unable to associate, mentally) a great lady and a shopgirl in a contest for a prize which should present analogies with his own personality. How could they have anything in common — even so small a thing as a desire to possess themselves of Hyacinth Robinson? A fact that he did not impart to Millicent, and that he could have no wish to impart to her, was the matter of his pilgrimage to Belgrave Square. He might be in love with the Princess (how could he qualify, as yet, the bewildered emotion she had produced in him?), and he certainly never would conceive a passion for poor Lady Aurora; yet it would have given him pain much greater than any he felt in the other case, to hear the girl make free with the ministering angel of Audley Court. The difference was, perhaps, somehow in that she appeared really not to touch or arrive at the Princess at all; whereas Lady Aurora was within her compass.

After paying him that visit at his rooms Hyacinth lost sight of Captain Sholto, who had not again reappeared at the Sun and Moon, the little tavern in Bloomsbury which presented so common and casual a face to the world, and yet, in its unsuspected rear, offered a security as yet unimpugned to machinations going down to the very bottom of things. Nothing was more natural than that the captain should be engaged at this season in the recreations of his class; and our young man took for granted that if he were not hanging about

the Princess, on that queer footing as to which he himself had a secret hope that he should some day have more light, he was probably ploughing through northern seas on a yacht or creeping after stags in the Highlands; our hero's acquaintance with the light literature of his country being such as to assure him that in one or other of these occupations people of leisure, during the autumn, were necessarily immersed. If the captain were giving his attention to neither, he must have started for Madagascar, or at least for Paris. Happy captain, Hyacinth reflected, while his imagination followed him through all kinds of vivid exotic episodes, and his restless young feet continued to tread, through the stale, flat weeks of September and October, the familiar pavements of Soho and Pentonville, and the shabby sinuous ways which unite these extensive districts. He had told the Princess that he sometimes had a holiday at this period, and that there was a chance of his escorting his respectable companion to the seaside; but as it turned out, at present, the spare cash for such an excursion was wanting. Hyacinth had indeed, for the moment, an exceptionally keen sense of the absence of this article, and was forcibly reminded that it took a good deal of money to cultivate the society of agreeable women. He not only had not a penny, but he was much in debt, and the explanation of his pinched feeling was in a vague, half-remorseful, half-resigned reference to the numerous occasions when he had had to put his hand in his pocket under penalty of disappointing a young lady whose needs were positive, and, especially, to a certain high crisis (as it might prove to be) in his destiny, when it came over him that one couldn't call on a princess just as one was. So, this year, he did not ask old Crookenden for the week which some of the other men took (Eustache Poupin, who had never quitted London since his arrival, launched himself, precisely that summer, supported by his brave wife, into the British unknown, on the strength of a return ticket to Worthing); simply because he wouldn't know what to do with it. The best way not to spend money, though it was no doubt not the beet in the world to make it, was still to take one's daily course to the old familiar, shabby shop, where, as the days shortened and November thickened the air to a livid yellow, (he uncovered flame of the gas, burning often from the morning on, lighted up the ugliness amid which the hand of practice endeavored to put together a little beauty — the ugliness of a dingy, belittered interior; of battered, dispapered walls; of work-tables stained and hacked; of windows opening into a foul, drizzling street; of the bared arms, the sordid waistcoat-backs, the smeared aprons, the personal odor, the patient, obstinate, irritating shoulders and vulgar, narrow, inevitable faces, of his fellow-laborers. Hyacinth's relations with his comrades would form a chapter by itself, but all that may be said of the matter here is that the clever little journeyman from Lomax Place had a kind of double identity, and that much as he lived in Mr. Crookenden's establishment he lived out of it still more. In this busy, pasty, sticky, leathery little world, where wages and beer were the main objects of consideration, he played his part in a manner which caused him to be regarded as a queer lot, but capable of queerness in the line of goodnature too. He had not made good his place there without discovering that the British workman, when animated by the spirit of mirth, has rather a heavy hand, and he tasted of the practical joke in every degree of violence. During his first year he dreamed, with secret passion and suppressed tears, of a day of bliss when at last they would let him alone — a day which arrived in time, for it is always an advantage to be clever, if only one is clever enough. Hyacinth was sufficiently so to have invented a modus vivendi in respect to which M. Poupin said to him, "Enfin vous voila ferme!" (the Frenchman himself, terribly eprouve at the beginning, had always bristled with firmness and opposed to insulary grossness a sonorous dignity), and under the influence of which the scenery of Soho figured as a daily, dusky phantasmagoria, relegated to the mechanical, passive part of experience, and giving no hostages to reality, or at least to ambition, save an insufficient number of shillings on Saturday night, and spasmodic reminiscences of delicate work" that might have been more delicate still, as well as of certain applications of the tool which he flattered himself were unsurpassed, unless by the supreme Eustace.

One evening in November, after discharging himself of a considerable indebtedness to Pinnie, he had still a sovereign in his pocket — a sovereign which seemed to spin there at the opposed solicitation of a dozen exemplary uses. He had come out for a walk, with a vague intention of pushing as far as Audley Court; and lurking within this nebulous design, on which the damp breath of the streets, making objects seem that night particularly dim and places particularly far, had blown a certain chill, was a sense that it would be rather nice to take something to Rose Muniment, who delighted in a sixpenny present, and to whom, for some time, he had not rendered any such homage. At last, after he had wandered a while, hesitating between the pilgrimage to Lambeth and the possibility of still associating his evening in some way or other with that of Miss Henning, he reflected that if a sovereign was to be pulled to pieces it was a simplification to get it changed. He had been traversing the region of Mayfair, partly with the preoccupation of a short cut, and partly from an instinct of self-defense; if one was in danger of spending one's money precipitately, it was so much gained to plunge into a quarter in which, at that hour especially, there were no shops for little bookbinders. Hyacinth's victory, however, was imperfect when it occurred to him to turn into a public house in order to convert his gold into convenient silver. When it was a question of entering these establishments he selected in preference the most decent; he never knew what unpleasant people he might find on the other side of the swinging door. Those which glitter, at intervals, amid the residential gloom of Mayfair partake of the general gentility of the neighborhood, so that Hyacinth was not surprised (he had passed into the compartment marked "private bar ") to see but a single drinker leaning against the counter on which, with his request very civilly enunciated, he put down his sovereign. He was surprised, on the other hand, when, glancing up again, he became aware that this solitary drinker was Captain Godfrey Sholto.

“Why, my dear boy, what a remarkable coincidence!” the captain exclaimed. “For once in five years that I come into a place like this!”

“I don’t come in often myself. I thought you were at Madagascar,” said Hyacinth.

“Ah, because I have not been at the Sun and Moon? Well, I have been constantly out of town, you know. And then — don’t you see what I mean? — I want to be tremendously discreet. That’s the way to get on, isn’t it? But I dare say you don’t believe in my discretion!” Sholto laughed. “What shall I do to make you understand? I say, have a brandy and soda,” he continued, as if this might assist Hyacinth’s comprehension. He seemed a trifle flurried, and, if it were possible to imagine such a thing of so independent and whimsical a personage, the least bit abashed or uneasy at having been found in such a low place. It was not any lower, after all, than the Sun and Moon. He was dressed on this occasion according to his station, without the pot-hat and the shabby jacket, and Hyacinth looked at him with a sense that a good tailor must really add a charm to life. Our hero was struck more than ever before with his being the type of man whom, as he strolled about, observing people, he had so often regarded with wonder and envy — the sort of man of whom one said to one’s self that he was the “finest white,” feeling that he had the world in his pocket. Sholto requested the barmaid to please not dawdle in preparing the brandy and soda, which Hyacinth had thought to ease off the situation by accepting: this, indeed, was perhaps what the finest white would naturally do. And when the young man had taken the glass from the counter Sholto appeared to encourage him not to linger as he drank it, and smiled down at him very kindly and amusedly, as if the combination of a very small bookbinder and a big tumbler were sufficiently droll.

The captain took time, however, to ask Hyacinth how he had spent his autumn and what was the news in Bloomsbury; he further inquired about those delightful people over the river. “I can’t tell you what an impression they made upon me — that evening, you know.” After this he remarked to Hyacinth, suddenly, irrelevantly, “And so you are just going to stay on for the winter, quietly?” Our young man stared: he wondered what other project any one could attribute to him; he could not reflect, immediately, that this was the sort of thing the finest whites said to each other when they met, after their fashionable dispersals, and that his friend had only been guilty of a momentary inadvertence. In point of fact, the captain recovered himself: “Oh, of course you have got your work, and that sort of thing;” and, as Hyacinth did not succeed in swallowing at a gulp the contents of his big tumbler, he asked him presently whether he had heard anything from the Princess. Hyacinth replied that he could have no news except what the captain might be good enough to give him; but he gilded that he did go to see her just before she left town.

“Ah, you did go to see her? That’s quite right — quite right.”

“I went because she, very kindly, wrote to me to come.”

“Ah, she wrote to you to come?” The captain fixed Hyacinth for a moment with his curious, colorless eyes. “Do you know you are a devilish privileged mortal?”

“Certainly, I know that.” Hyacinth blushed and felt foolish; the barmaid, who had heard this odd couple talking about a princess, was staring at him too, with her elbows on the counter.

“Do you know there are people who would give their heads that she should write to them to come?”

“I have no doubt of it whatever!” Hyacinth exclaimed, taking refuge in a laugh which did not sound as natural as he would have liked, and wondering whether his interlocutor were not, precisely, one of these people. In this case the barmaid might well stare; for deeply convinced as our young man might be that he was the son of Lord Frederick Purvis, there was really no end to the oddity of his being preferred — and by a princess — to Captain Sholto. If anything could have reinforced, at that moment, his sense of this anomaly, it would have been the indescribably gentlemanly way, implying all sorts of common imitations, in which his companion went on.

“Ah, well, I see you know how to take it! And if you are in correspondence with her, why do you say that you can hear from her only through me? My dear fellow, I am not in correspondence with her. You might think I would naturally be, but I am not.” He added, as Hyacinth had laughed again, in a manner that might have passed for ambiguous, “So much the worse for me — is that what you mean?” Hyacinth replied that he himself had had the honor of hearing from the Princess only once, and he mentioned that she had told him that her letter-writing came only in fits, when it was sometimes very profuse; there were months together that she didn’t touch a pen. “Oh, I can imagine what she told you!” the captain exclaimed. “Look out for the next fit! She is visiting about. It’s a great thing to be in the same house with her — an immense comedy.” He remarked that he had heard, now he remembered, that she either had taken, or was thinking of taking, a house in the country for a few months, and he added that if Hyacinth didn’t propose to finish his brandy and soda they might as well turn out. Hyacinth’s thirst had been very superficial, and as they turned out the captain observed, by way of explanation of his having been found in a public house (it was the only attempt of this kind he made), that any friend of his would always know him by his love of curious, out-of-the-way nooks. “You must have noticed that,” he said,— “my taste for exploration. If I hadn’t explored, I never should have known you, should I? That was rather a nice little girl in there; did you twig her figure? It’s a pity they always have such beastly hands,” Hyacinth, instinctively, had made a motion to go southward, but Sholto, passing a hand into his arm, led him the other way. The house they had quitted was near a corner, which they rounded, the captain pushing forward as if there were some reason for haste. His haste was checked, however, by an immediate collision with a young woman who, coming in the opposite direction, turned the angle as briskly as

themselves. At this moment the captain gave Hyacinth a great jerk, but not before he had caught a glimpse of the young woman's face — it seemed to flash upon him out of the dusk — and given quick voice to his surprise.

"Hallo, Millicent!" This was the simple cry that escaped from his lips, while the captain, still going on, inquired, "What's the matter? Who's your pretty friend?" Hyacinth declined to go on, and repeated Miss Henning's baptismal name so loudly that the young woman, who had passed them without looking back, was obliged to stop. Then Hyacinth saw that he was not mistaken, though Millicent gave no audible response. She stood looking at him, with her head very high, and he approached her, disengaging himself from Sholto, who, however, hung back only an instant before joining them. Hyacinth's heart had suddenly begun to beat very fast; there was a sharp shock in the girl's turning up in just that place at that moment. Yet when she began to laugh, abruptly, with violence, and to ask him why he was looking at her as if she were a kicking horse, he recognized that there was nothing so very extraordinary, after all, in a casual meeting between persons who were such frequenters of the London streets. Millicent had never concealed the fact that she "trotted about," on various errands, at night; and once, when he had said to her that the less a respectable young woman took the evening air alone the better for her respectability, she had asked how respectable he thought she pretended to be, and had remarked that if he would make her a present of a brougham, or even call for her three or four times a week in a cab, she would doubtless preserve more of the precious quality. She could turn the tables quickly enough, and she exclaimed, now, professing, on her own side, great astonishment —

"What are you prowling about here for? You 're after no good, I'll be bound!"

"Good evening, Miss Henning; what a jolly meeting!" said the captain, removing his hat with a humorous flourish.

"Oh, how d' ye do?" Millicent returned, as if she did not immediately place him.

"Where were you going so fast? What are you doing?" asked Hyacinth, who had looked from one to the other.

"Well, I never did see such a manner — from one that knocks about like you!" cried Miss Henning. "I'm going to see a friend of mine who's a lady's maid . in Curzon Street. Have you anything to say to that?"

"Don't tell us — don't tell us!" Sholto interposed, after she had spoken (she had not hesitated an instant). "I, at least, disavow the indiscretion. Where may not a charming woman be going when she trips with a light foot through the gathering dusk?"

"I say, what are you talking about?" the girl inquired, with dignity, of Hyacinth's companion. She spoke as if with a resentful suspicion that her foot was not light.

"On what errand of mercy of secret tenderness?" the captain went on, laughing.

"Secret yourself!" cried Millicent. "Do you two always hunt in couples?"

"All right, we'll turn round and go with you as far as your friend's," Hyacinth said.

"All right," Millicent replied.

"All right," the captain added; and the three took their way together in the direction of Curzon Street. They walked for a few moments in silence, though the captain whistled, and then Millicent suddenly turned to Hyacinth: —

"You haven't told me where you were going, yet."

"We met in that public house," the captain said, "and we were each so ashamed of being found in such a place by the other that we tumbled out together, without much thinking what we should do with ourselves."

"When he's out with me he pretends he can't abide them houses," Miss Henning declared. "I wish I had looked in that one, to see who was there."

"Well, she's rather nice," the captain went on. "She told me her name was Georgiana."

"I went to get a piece of money changed," Hyacinth, said, with a sense that there was a certain dishonesty in the air; glad that he, at least, could afford to speak the truth.

"To get your grandmother's nightcap changed! I recommend you to keep your money together — you've none too much of it!" Millicent exclaimed.

"Is that the reason you are playing me false?" Hyacinth flashed out. He had been thinking, with still intentness, as they walked; at once nursing and wrestling with a kindled suspicion. He was pale with the idea that he was being bamboozled; yet he was able to say to himself that one must allow, in life, for the element of coincidence, and that he might easily put himself immensely in the wrong by making a groundless charge. It was only later that he pieced his impressions together, and saw them — as it appeared — justify each other; at present, as soon as he had uttered it, he was almost ashamed of his quick retort to Millicent's taunt. He ought, at least, to have waited to see what Curzon Street would bring forth.

The girl broke out upon him immediately, repeating, "False, false?" with high derision, and wanting to know whether that was the way to knock a lady about in public. She had stopped short on the edge of a crossing, and she went on, with a voice so uplifted that he was glad they were in a street that was rather empty at such an hour: "You 're a pretty one to talk about falsity, when a woman has only to leer at you out of an opera-box!"

"Don't say anything about her" the young man interposed, trembling.

"And pray why not about 'her,' I should like to know? You don't pretend she's a decent woman, I suppose!" Millicent's laughter rang through the quiet neighborhood.

“My dear fellow, you know you have been to her,” Captain Sholto remarked, smiling.

Hyacinth turned upon him, staring, at once challenged and baffled by his ambiguous part in an incident it was doubtless possible to magnify, but it was not possible to treat as perfectly simple. “Certainly, I have been to the Princess Casamassima, thanks to you. When you came and begged me, when you dragged me, do you make it a reproach? Who the devil are you, any way, and what do you want of me?” our hero cried, his mind flooded in a moment with everything in the captain that had puzzled him and eluded him. This swelling tide obliterated on the spot everything that had entertained and gratified him.

“My dear fellow, whatever I am, I am not an ass,” this gentleman replied, with imperturbable good-humor. “I don’t reproach you with anything. I only wanted to put in a word as a peacemaker. My good friends — my good friends,” and he laid a hand, in his practiced way, on Hyacinth’s shoulder, while, with the other pressed to his heart, he bent on the girl a face of gallantry which had something paternal in it, “I am determined this absurd misunderstanding shall end as lovers’ quarrels ought always to end.”

Hyacinth withdrew himself from the captain’s touch, and said to Millicent, “You are not really jealous of — of any one. You pretend that, only to throw dust in my eyes.”

To this sally Miss Henning returned him an answer which promised to be lively, but the captain swept it away in the profusion of his protests. He pronounced them a dear, delightful, abominable young couple; he declared it was most interesting to see how, in people of their sort, the passions lay near the surface; he almost pushed them into each other’s arms; and he wound up by proposing that they should all terminate their little differences by proceeding together to the Pavilion music hall, the nearest place of entertainment in that neighborhood, leaving the lady’s maid in Curzon Street to dress her mistress’s wig in peace. He has been presented to the reader as an accomplished man, and it will doubtless be felt that the picture is justified when I relate that he placed this idea in so attractive a light that his companions finally entered a hansom with him, and rattled toward the haunt of pleasure, Hyacinth sandwiched, on the edge of the seat, between the others. Two or three times his ears burned; he felt that if there was an understanding between them they had now, behind him, a rare opportunity for carrying it out. If it was at his expense, the whole evening constituted for them, indeed, an opportunity, and this thought rendered his diversion but scantily absorbing, though at the Pavilion the captain engaged a private box and ordered ices to be brought in. Hyacinth cared so little for his little pink pyramid that he suffered Millicent to consume it after she had disposed of her own. It was present to him, however, that if he should make a fool of himself the folly would be of a very gross kind, and this is why he withheld a question which rose to his lips repeatedly — a disposition to inquire of his entertainer why the mischief he had hurried him so out of the public house, if he had not been waiting there, preconcertedly, for Millicent. We know that in Hyacinth’s eyes one of this young lady’s compensatory merits had been that she was not deceitful, and he asked himself if a girl could change, that way, from one month to the other. This was optimistic, but, all the same, he reflected, before leaving the Pavilion, that he could see quite well what Lady Aurora meant by thinking Captain Sholto vulgar.

Chapter XXI

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PAUL MUNIMENT had fits of silence, while the others were talking; but on this occasion he had not opened his lips for half an hour. When he talked Hyacinth listened, almost holding his breath; and when he said nothing Hyacinth watched him fixedly, listening to the others only through the medium of his candid countenance. At the Sun and Moon Muniment paid very little attention to his young friend, doing nothing that should cause it to be perceived they were particular pals; and Hyacinth even thought, at moments, that he was bored or irritated by the serious manner in which the little bookbinder could not conceal from the world that he took him. He wondered whether this were a system, a calculated prudence, on Muniment’s part, or only a manifestation of that superior brutality, latent in his composition, which never had an intention of unkindness, but was naturally intolerant of palaver. There was plenty of palaver at the Sun and Moon; there were nights when a blast of imbecility seemed to blow over the place, and one felt ashamed to be associated with so much insistent ignorance and panting vanity. Then every one, with two or three exceptions, made an ass of himself, thumping the table and repeating over some inane phrase which appeared for the hour to constitute the whole furniture of his mind. There were men who kept saying, “Them was my words in the month of February last, and what I say I stick to — what I say I stick to; “and others who perpetually inquired of the company, “And what the plague am I to do with seventeen shillings — with seventeen shillings? What am I to do with them — will ye tell me that?” an interrogation which, in truth, usually ended by eliciting a ribald reply. There were still others who remarked, to satiety, that if it was not done to-day it would have to be done tomorrow, and several who constantly proclaimed their opinion that the only way was to pull up the Park rails again — just to pluck them straight up. A little shoemaker, with, red eyes and a grayish face, whose appearance Hyacinth deplored, scarcely ever expressed himself but in the same form of words: “Well, are we in earnest, or ain’t we in earnest? — that’s the thing I want to know.” He was terribly in earnest himself, but this was almost the only way he had of showing it; and he had much in common (though they were always squabbling) with a large,

red-faced man, of uncertain attributes and stentorous breathing, who was understood to know a good deal about dogs, had fat hands, and wore on his forefinger a big silver ring, containing some one's hair (Hyacinth believed it to be that of a terrier, snappish in life). He had always the same refrain: "Well, now, are we just starving, or ain't we just starving? I should like the 'vice of the company on that question."

When the tone fell as low as this Paul Muniment held his peace, except that he whistled a little, leaning back, with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the table. Hyacinth often supposed him to be on the point of breaking out and letting the company know what he thought of them — he had a perfectly clear vision of what he must think: but Muniment never compromised his popularity to that degree; he judged it — this he once told Hyacinth — too valuable an instrument, and cultivated the faculty of patience, which had the advantage of showing one more and more that one must do one's thinking for one's self. His popularity, indeed, struck Hyacinth as rather an uncertain quantity, and the only mistake he had seen a symptom of on his friend's part was a tendency to overestimate it. Muniment thought many of their colleagues asinine, but it was Hyacinth's belief that he himself knew still better how asinine they were; and this inadequate conception supported, in some degree, on Paul's part, his theory of his influence — an influence that would be stronger than any other on the day he should choose to exert it. Hyacinth only wished that day would come; it would not be till then, he was sure, that they would all know where they were, and that the good they were striving for, blindly, obstructedly, in a kind of eternal dirty intellectual fog, would pass from the stage of crude discussion and mere sharp, tantalizing desirableness into that of irresistible reality. Muniment was listened to unanimously, when he spoke, and was much talked about, usually with a knowing, implicit allusiveness, when he was absent; it was generally admitted that he could see further than most. But it was suspected that he wanted to see further than was necessary; as one of the most inveterate frequenters of the club remarked one evening, if a man could see as far as he could chuck a brick, that was far enough.

There was an idea that he had nothing particular to complain of, personally, or that if he had he didn't complain of it — an attitude which perhaps contained the germs of a latent disaffection. Hyacinth could easily see that he himself was exposed to the same imputation, but he couldn't help it; it would have been impossible to him to keep up his character for sincerity by revealing, at the Sun and Moon, the condition of his wardrobe, or announcing that he had not had a morsel of bacon for six months. There were members of the club who were apparently always in the enjoyment of involuntary leisure — narrating the vainest peregrinations in search of a job, the cruelest rebuffs, the most vivid anecdotes of the insolence of office. They made Hyacinth uncomfortably conscious, at times, that if he should be out of work it would be wholly by his own fault; that he had in his hand a bread-winning tool on which he might absolutely count. He was also aware, however, that his position in this little band of malcontents (it was little only if measured by the numbers that were gathered together on any one occasion; he liked to think it was large in its latent possibilities, its mysterious ramifications and affiliations) was peculiar and distinguished; it would be favorable if he had the kind of energy and assurance that would help him to make use of it. He had an intimate conviction — the proof of it was in the air, in the sensible facility of his footing at the Sun and Moon — that Eustache Poupin had taken upon himself to disseminate the anecdote of his origin, of his mother's disaster; in consequence of which, as the victim of social infamy, of heinous laws, it was conceded to him that he had a larger account to settle even than most. He was ab ovo a revolutionist, and that balanced against his smart neckties, a certain suspicious security that was perceived in him as to the h (he had had from his earliest years a natural command of it), and the fact that he possessed the sort of hand on which there is always a premium — an accident somehow to be guarded against in a thoroughgoing system of equality. He never challenged Poupin on the subject, for he owed the Frenchman too much to reproach him with any officious step that was meant in kindness; and moreover, his fellow-laborer at old Crookenden's had said to him, as if to anticipate such an impugnment of his discretion, "Remember, my child, that I am incapable of drawing aside any veil that you may have preferred to drop over your lacerated personality. Your moral dignity will always be safe with me. But remember at the same time that among the disinherited there is a mystic language which dispense with proofs — a freemasonry, a reciprocal divination; they understand each other with half a word." It was with half a word, then, in Bloomsbury, that Hyacinth had been understood; but there was a certain delicacy within him that forbade him to push his advantage, to treat implications of sympathy, none the less definite for being roundabout, as steps in the ladder of success. He had no wish to be a leader because his mother had murdered her lover and died in penal servitude: these circumstances recommended intentness, but they also suggested modesty. When the gathering at the Sun and Moon was at its best, and its temper seemed really an earnest of what was the basis of all its calculations — that the people was only a sleeping lion, already breathing shorter and beginning to stretch its limbs — at these hours, some of them thrilling enough, Hyacinth waited for the voice that should allot to him the particular part he was to play. His ambition was to play it with brilliancy, to offer an example — an example, even, that might survive him — of pure youthful, almost juvenile, consecration. He was conscious of no commission to give the promises, to assume the responsibilities, of a redeemer, and he had no envy of the man on whom this burden should rest. Muniment, indeed, might carry it, and it was the first article of his faith that, to help him to carry it the better, he himself was ready for any sacrifice. Then it was — on these nights of intenser vibration — that Hyacinth waited for a sign.

They came oftener, this second winter, for the season was terribly hard; and as, in that lower world, one walked with one's ear nearer the ground, the deep perpetual groan of London misery seemed to swell and

swell, and form the whole undertone of life. The filthy air came into the place in the damp coats of silent men, and hung there till it was brewed to a nauseous warmth, and ugly, serious faces squared themselves through it, and strong-smelling pipes contributed their element in a fierce, dogged manner which appeared to say that it now had to stand for everything — for bread and meat and beer, for shoes and blankets and the poor things at the pawnbroker's and the smokeless chimney ,at home. Hyacinth's colleagues seemed to him wiser then, and more permeated with intentions boding ill to the satisfied classes; and though the note of popularity was still most effectively struck by the man who could demand oftenest, unpractically, "What the plague am I to do with seventeen shillings?" it was brought home to our hero on more than one occasion that revolution was ripe at last. This was especially the case on the evening I began by referring to, when Eustache Poupin squeezed in and announced, as if it were a great piece of news, that in the east of London, that night, there were forty thousand men out of work. He looked round the circle with his dilated foreign eye, as he took his place; he seemed to address the company individually as well as collectively, and to make each man responsible for hearing him. He owed his position, at the Sun and Moon, to the brilliancy with which he represented the political exile, the magnanimous, immaculate citizen wrenched out of bed at dead of night, torn from his hearthstone, his loved ones, and his profession, and hurried across the frontier with only the coat on his back. Poupin had performed in this character now for many years, but he had never lost the bloom of the outraged prescript, and the passionate pictures he had often drawn of the bitterness of exile were moving even to those who knew with what success he had set up his household gods in Lisson Grove. He was recognized as suffering everything for his opinions; and his hearers in Bloomsbury — who, after all, even in their most concentrated hours, were very goodnatured — appeared never to have made the subtle reflection, though they made many others, that there was a want of tact in his calling upon them to sympathize with him for being one of themselves. He imposed himself by the eloquence of his assumption that if one were not in the beautiful France one was nowhere worth speaking of, and ended by producing an impression that that country had an almost supernatural charm. Muniment had once said to Hyacinth that he was sure Poupiu would be very sorry if he should be enabled to go home again, for over there he couldn't be a refugee; and however this might be, he certainly flourished a good deal in London on the basis of this very fact that he oughtn't to be there.

"Why do you tell us that, as if it were so very striking? Don't we know it, and haven't we known it always? But you are right; we behave as if we knew nothing at all," said the German cabinetmaker, who had originally introduced Captain Sholto to the Sun and Moon. He had a long, unhealthy, benevolent face and greasy hair, and constantly wore a kind of untidy bandage round his neck, as if for a local ailment. "You remind us — that is very well; but we shall forget it in half an hour. We are not serious."

"Pardon, pardon; for myself, I do not admit that!" Poupiu replied, striking the table with his fingertips several times, very fast. "If I am not serious, I am nothing."

"Oh no, you are something," said the German, smoking his monumental pipe with a contemplative air. "We are all something; but I am not sure it is anything very useful."

"Well, things would be worse without us. I 'd rather be in here, in this kind of muck, than outside," remarked the fat man, who understood dogs.

"Certainly, it is very pleasant, especially if you have your beer; but not so pleasant in the east, where fifty thousand people starve. It is a very unpleasant night," the cabinetmaker went on.

"How can it be worse?" Eustache Poupin inquired, looking defiantly at the German, as if to make him responsible for the fat man's reflection. "It is so bad that the imagination recoils, refuses."

"Oh, we don't care for the imagination!" the fat man declared. "We want a compact body, in marching order."

"What do you call a compact body?" the little gray-faced shoemaker demanded. "I dare say you don't mean your kind of body."

"Well, I know what I mean," said the fat man, severely.

"That's a grand thing. Perhaps one of these days you'll tell us."

"You'll see it for yourself, perhaps, before that day comes," the gentleman with the silver ring rejoined. "Perhaps when you do, you'll remember."

"Well, you know, Schinkel says we don't," said the shoemaker, nodding at the cloud-compelling German.

"I don't care what no man says!" the dog-fancier exclaimed, gazing straight before him.

"They say it's a bad year — the blockheads in the newspapers," Mr. Schinkel went on, addressing himself to the company at large. "They say that on purpose — to convey the impression that there are such things as good years. I ask the company, has any gentleman present ever happened to notice that article? The good year is yet to come: it might begin tonight, if we like; it all depends 011 our being able to be serious for a few hours. But that is too much to expect. Mr. Muniment is very serious; he looks as if he were waiting for the signal; but he doesn't speak — he never speaks, if I want particularly to hear him. He only considers, very deeply, I am sure. But it is almost as bad to think without speaking as to speak without thinking."

Hyacinth always admired the cool, easy way in which Muniment comported himself when the attention of the public was directed towards him. These manifestations of curiosity, or of hostility, would have put him out immensely, himself. When a lot of people, especially the kind of people who were collected at the Sun and Moon, looked at him, or listened to him, at once, he always blushed and stammered, feeling that if he couldn't have a million of spectators (which would have been inspiring) he should prefer to have but two or three;

there was something very embarrassing in twenty.

Muniment smiled, for an instant, good-humoredly; then, after a moment's hesitation, looking across at the German, and the German only, as if his remark were worth noticing, but it didn't matter if the others didn't understand the reply, he said simply, "Hoffendahl's in London."

"Hoffendahl? Lieber Gott!" the cabinetmaker exclaimed, taking the pipe out of his mouth. And the two men exchanged a longish glance. Then Mr. Schinkel remarked, "That surprises me sehr. Are you very sure?"

Muniment continued, for a moment, to look at him. "If I keep quiet for half an hour, with so many valuable suggestions flying all round me, you think I say too little. Then if I open my head to give out three words, you appear to think I say too much."

"Ah, no; on the contrary, I want you to say three more. If you tell me you have seen him I shall be perfectly satisfied."

"Upon my word, I should hope so! Do you think he's the kind of party a fellow says he has seen?"

"Yes, when he hasn't!" said Eustache Poupin, who had been listening. Every one was listening now.

"It depends on the fellow he says it to. Not even here?" the German asked.

"Oh, here!" Paul Muniment exclaimed, in a peculiar tone, and resumed his muffled whistle again.

"Take care — take care; you will make me think you haven't!" cried Poupin, with his excited expression.

"That's just what, I want," said Muniment.

"Nun,

I understand," the cabinetmaker remarked, restoring his pipe to his lips after an interval almost as momentous as the stoppage of a steamer in mid-ocean.

"'Ere,

'ere?" repeated the small shoemaker, indignantly. "I dare say it's as good as the place he came from. He might look in and see what he thinks of it."

"That's a place you might tell us a little about, now," the fat man suggested, as if he had been waiting for his chance.

Before the shoemaker had time to notice this challenge some one inquired, with a hoarse petulance, who the blazes they were talking about; and Mr. Schinkel took upon himself to reply that they were talking about a man who hadn't done what he had done by simply exchanging abstract ideas, however valuable, with his friends in a respectable pothouse.

"What the devil has he done, then?" some one else demanded; and Muniment replied, quietly, that he had spent twelve years in a Prussian prison, and was consequently still an object of a good deal of interest to the police.

"Well, if you call that very useful, I must say I prefer a pothouse!" cried the shoemaker, appealing to all the company, and looking, as it appeared to Hyacinth, particularly hideous.

"Dock, dock, it is useful," the German remarked, philosophically, among his yellow clouds.

"Do you mean to say you are not prepared for that, yourself?" Muniment inquired of the shoemaker.

"Prepared for that? I thought we were going to smash that sort of shop altogether; I thought that was the main part of the job."

"They will smash best, those who have been inside," the German declared; "unless, perhaps, they are broken, enervated. But Hoffendahl is not enervated."

"Ah, no; no smashing, no smashing," Muniment went on. "We want to keep them standing, and even to build a few more; but the difference will be that we shall put the correct sort in."

"I take your idea — that Griffin is one of the correct sort," the fat man remarked, indicating the shoemaker.

"I thought we was going to 'ave their 'eads — all that bloomin' lot!" Mr. Griffin declared, protesting; while Eustache Poupin began to enlighten the company as to the great Hoffendahl, one of the purest martyrs of their cause, a man who had been through everything — who had been scarred and branded, tortured, almost flayed, and had never given them the names they wanted to have. Was it possible they didn't remember that great combined attempt, early in the fifties, which took place in four Continental cities at once, and which, in spite of every effort to smother it up — there had been editors and journalists transported even for hinting at it — had done more for the social question than anything before or since? "Through him being served in the manner you describe?" some one asked, with plainness; to which Poupin replied that it was one of those failures that are more glorious than any success. Muniment said that the affair had been only a flash in the pan, but that the great value of it was this — that whereas some forty persons (and of both sexes) had been engaged in it, only one had been seized and had suffered. It had been Hoffendahl himself who was bagged. Certainly he had suffered much, he had suffered for every one; but from that point of view — that of the economy of material — the thing had been a rare success.

"Do you know what I call the others? I call 'em bloody sneaks!" the fat man cried; and Eustache Poupin, turning to Muniment, expressed the hope that he didn't really approve of such a solution — didn't Consider that an economy of heroism was an advantage to any cause. He himself esteemed Hoffendahl's attempt because it had shaken, more than it had been shaken since the French Revolution, the rotten fabric of the actual social order, and because that very fact of the impunity, the invisibility, of the persons concerned in it had given the predatory classes, had given all Europe, a shudder that had not yet subsided; but for his part, he must regret that some of the associates of the devoted victim had not come forward and insisted on sharing

with him his tortures and his captivity.

"C'aurait est d'un bel exemple!" said the Frenchman, with an impressive moderation of statement which made even those who could not understand him see that he was saying something fine; while the cabinetmaker remarked that in Hoffendahl's place any of them would have stood out just the same. He didn't care if they set it down to self-love (Mr. Schinkel called it "loaf "), but he might say that he himself would have done so if he had been trusted and had been seized.

"I want to have it all drawn up clear first; then I'll go in," said the fat man, who seemed to think it was expected of him to be reassuring.

"Well, who the dickens is to draw it up, eh? That's what we happen to be talking about," returned his antagonist the shoemaker.

"A fine example, old man? Is that your idea of a fine example?" Muniment, with his amused face, asked of Poupin. "A fine example of asininity! Are there capable people, in such plenty, about the place?"

"Capable of greatness of soul, I grant you not."

"Your greatness of soul is usually greatness of blundering. A man's foremost duty is not to get bagged. If you want to show you 're solid, that's the way."

At this Hyacinth suddenly felt himself moved to speak. "But some one must be caught, always, must he not? Hasn't some one always been?"

"Oh, I dare say you'll be, if you like it!" Muniment replied, without looking at him. "If they succeed in potting you, do as Hoffendahl did, and do it as a matter of course j but if they don't, make it your supreme duty, make it your religion, to lie close and keep yourself for another go. The world is full of unclean beasts whom I shall be glad to see shoveled away by the thousand; but when it's a question of honest men and men of courage, I protest against the idea that two should be sacrificed where one will serve."

"Trop d'arithmetique — trop d'arithmetique! That is fearfully English!" Poupin cried.

"No doubt, no doubt; what else should it be? You shall never share my fate, if I have a fate, and I can prevent it!" said Muniment, laughing.

Eustache Poupin stared at him and his merriment, as if he thought the English frivolous as well as calculating; then he rejoined, "If I suffer, I trust it may be for suffering humanity, but I trust it may also be for France."

"Oh, I hope you ain't going to suffer any more for France," said Mr. Griffin. "Hasn't it done that insatiable old country of yours some good, by this time, all you've had to put up with?"

"Well, I want to know what Hoffendahl has come over for; it's very kind of him, I'm sure. What is he going to do for us? — that's what I want to know," remarked in a loud, argumentative tone a personage at the end of the table most distant from Muniment's place. His name was Delancey, and he gave himself out as holding a position in a manufactory of soda-water; but Hyacinth had a secret belief that he was really a hairdresser — a belief connected with a high, lustrous curl, or crest, which he wore on the summit of his large head, and the manner in which he thrust over his ear, as if it were a barber's comb, the pencil with which he was careful to take notes of the discussions carried on at the Sun and Moon. His opinions were distinct and frequently expressed; he had a watery (Muniment had once called it a soda-watery) eye, and a personal aversion to a lord. He desired to change everything except religion, of which he approved.

Muniment answered that he was unable to say, as yet, what the German revolutionist had come to England for, but that he hoped to be able to give some information on the matter the next time they should meet. It was very certain Hoffendahl hadn't come for nothing, and he would undertake to declare that they would all feel, within a short time, that he had given a lift to the cause they were interested in. He had had a great experience, and they might very well find it useful to consult. If there was a way for them, then and there, he was sure to know the way. '" I quite agree with the majority of you — as I take it to be," Muniment went on, with his fresh, cheerful, reasonable manner— "I quite agree with you that the time has come to settle upon it and to follow it. I quite agree with you that the actual state of things is" — he paused a moment, and then went on in the same pleasant tone— "is hellish."

These remarks were received with a differing demonstration: some of the company declaring that if the Dutchman cared to come round and smoke a pipe they would be glad to see him — perhaps he 'd show where the thumbscrews had been put on; others being strongly of the opinion that they didn't want any more advice — they had already had advice enough to turn a donkey's stomach. What they wanted was to put forth their might without any more palaver; to do something, or for some one; to go out somewhere and smash something, on the spot — why not? — that very night. While they sat there and talked, there were about half a million of people in London that didn't know where the h — the morrow's meal was to come from; what they wanted to do, unless they were just a collection of abominable wind-bags, was to show them where to get it, to take it to them with heaped-up hands. Hyacinth listened, with a divided attention, to interlaced iterations, while the talk blew hot and cold; there was a genuine emotion, tonight, in the rear of the Sun and Moon, and he felt the contagion of excited purpose. But he was following a train of his own; he was wondering what Muniment had in reserve (for he was sure he was only playing with the company), and his imagination, quickened by the sense of impending relations with the heroic Hoffendahl and the discussion as to the alternative duty of escaping or of facing one's fate, had launched itself into possible perils — into the idea of how he might, in a given case, settle for himself that question of paying for the lot. The loud, contradictory,

vain, unpractical babble went on about him, but he was definitely conscious only that the project of breaking into the bakers' shops was well before the assembly, and was receiving a vigorous treatment, and that there was likewise a good deal of reference to the butchers and grocers, and even to the fishmongers. He was in a state of inward exaltation; he was seized by an intense desire to stand face to face with the sublime Hoffendahl, to hear his voice, to touch his mutilated hand. He was ready for anything: he knew that he himself was safe to breakfast and dine, poorly but sufficiently, and that his colleagues were perhaps even more crude and clumsy than usual; but a breath of popular passion had passed over him, and he seemed to see, immensely magnified, the monstrosity of the great ulcers and sores of London — the sick, eternal misery crying, in the darkness, in vain, confronted with granaries and treasure-houses and places of delight, where shameless satiety kept guard. In. such a mood as this Hyacinth felt that there was no need to consider, to reason: the facts themselves were as imperative as the cry of the drowning; for while pedantry gained time, didn't starvation rage? He knew that Muniment disapproved of delay, that he held the day had come for a forcible rectification of horrible inequalities. In the last conversation they had had together, his chemical friend had given him a more definite warrant than he had ever done before for numbering him in the party of immediate action, though indeed he remarked, on this occasion, once more, that that particular formula which the little bookbinder appeared to have taken such a fancy to was mere gibberish. He hated that sort of little pretentious label; it was fit only for politicians. None the less, he had been as plain as possible on the point that their game must be now to frighten society, and frighten it effectually; to make it believe that the swindled classes were at last fairly in league — had really grasped the idea that, closely combined, they would be irresistible. They were not in league, and they hadn't in their totality grasped any idea at all. Muniment was not slow to make that equally plain. All the same, society was scare-able, and every great scare was a gain for the people. If Hyacinth had needed warrant tonight .for a faith that transcended logic, he would have found it in his recollection of this quiet profession; but his friend's words came back to him mainly to make him wonder what that friend had in his head just now. He took no part in the violence of the talk; he had called Schinkel to come round and sit beside him, and the two appeared to confer together in comfortable absorption, while the brown atmosphere grew denser, the passing to and fro of firebrands more lively, and the flush of faces more portentous. What Hyacinth would have liked to know most of all was why Muniment had not mentioned to him, first, that Hoffendahl was in London, and that he had seen him; for he had seen him, though he had dodged Schinkel's question — of that Hyacinth instantly felt sure. He would ask for more information later; and meanwhile he wished, without resentment, but with a certain helpless, patient longing, that Muniment would treat him with a' little more confidence. If there were a secret in regard to Hoffendahl (and there evidently was: Muniment, quite rightly, though he had dropped the announcement of his arrival, for a certain effect, had no notion of sharing the rest of what he knew with that raw roomful), if there was something to be silent and devoted about, Hyacinth ardently hoped that to him a chance would be given to show how he could practice this superiority. He felt hot and nervous; he got up suddenly, and, through the dark, tortuous, greasy passage which communicated with the outer world, he went forth into the street. The air was foul and sleety, but it refreshed him, and he stood in front of the public house and smoked another pipe. Bedraggled figures passed in and out, and a damp, tattered, wretched man, with a spongy, purple face, who had been thrust, suddenly, across the threshold, stood and whimpered in the brutal blaze of the row of lamps. The puddles glittered roundabout, and the silent vista of the street, bordered with low black houses, stretched away, in the wintry drizzle, to right and left, losing itself in the huge tragic city, where unmeasured misery lurked beneath the dirty night, ominously, monstrously, still, only howling, in its pain, in the heated human cockpit behind him. Ah, what could he do? What opportunity would rise? The blundering, divided counsels he had been listening to only made the helplessness of every one concerned more abject. If he had a definite wish while he stood there, it was that that exalted, deluded company should pour itself forth, with Muniment at its head, and surge through the sleeping city, gathering the myriad miserable out of their slums and burrows, and roll into the selfish squares, and lift a tremendous hungry voice, and awaken the gorged indifferent to a terror that would bring them down. Hyacinth lingered a quarter of an hour, but this grand spectacle gave no sign of coming off, and he finally returned to the noisy club-room, in a state of tormented wonder as to what better idea than this very bad one (which seemed to our young man to have at the least the merit that it was an idea) Muniment could be revolving in that too comprehensive brain of his.

As he reentered the place he saw that the meeting was breaking up in disorder, or at all events in confusion, and that, certainly, no organized attempt at the rescue of the proletariat would take place that night. All the men were on their feet and were turning away, amid a shuffling of benches and chairs, a hunching of shaggy shoulders, a frugal lowering of superfluous gas, and a varied vivacity of disgust and resignation. The moment after Hyacinth came in, Mr. Delancey, the supposititious hairdresser, jumped upon a chair at the far end of the room, and shrieked out an accusation which made every one stop and stare at him: —

"Well, I want you all to know what strikes me, before we part company. There isn't a man in the blessed lot that isn't afraid of his bloody skin — afraid, afraid, afraid! I'll go anywhere with any one, but there isn't another, by G — , by what I can make out! There isn't a mother's son of you that'll risk his precious bones!"

This little oration affected Hyacinth like a quick blow in the face; it seemed to leap at him personally, as if a three-legged stool, or some hideous hobnailed boot, had been shied at him. The room surged round, heaving

up and down, while he was conscious of a loud explosion of laughter and scorn; of cries of “Order, order!” of some clear word of Muniment’s, “I say, Delancey, just step down;” of Eustache Poupin shouting out, “Vous insultez le peuple — vous insultez le peuple!” of other retorts, not remarkable for refinement. The next moment Hyacinth found that he had sprung up on a chair, opposite to the barber, and that at the sight of so rare a phenomenon the commotion had suddenly checked itself. It was the first time he had asked the ear of the company, and it was given on the spot. I v was sure he looked very white, and it was even possible they could see him tremble. He could only hope that this didn’t make him ridiculous when he said, “I don’t think it’s right of him to say that. There are others, besides him. At all events, I want to speak for myself: it may do some good; I can’t help it. I’m not afraid; I’m very sure I’m not. I’m ready to do anything that will do any good; anything, anything — I don’t care a rap. In such a cause I should like the idea of danger. I don’t consider my bones precious in the least, compared with some other things. If one is sure one isn’t afraid, and one is accused, why shouldn’t one say so?”

It appeared to Hyacinth that he was talking a long time, and when it was over he scarcely knew what happened. He felt himself, in a moment, down almost under the feet of the other men; stamped upon with intentions of applause, of familiarity; laughed over and jeered over, and hustled and poked in the ribs. He felt himself also pressed to the bosom of Eustache Poupin, who apparently was sobbing, while he heard some say, “Did ye hear the little beggar, as bold as a lion?” A trial of personal prowess between him and Mr. Delancey was proposed, but somehow it didn’t take place, and at the end of five minutes the club-room emptied itself, not, evidently, to be reconstituted, outside, in a revolutionary procession. Paul Muniment had taken hold of Hyacinth, and said, “I’ll trouble you to stay, you little desperado. I’ll be blowed if I ever expected to see you on the stump!” Muniment remained, and M. Poupin and Mr. Schinkel lingered in their overcoats, beneath a dim, surviving gas-burner, in the unventilated medium in which, at each renewed gathering, the Bloomsbury club seemed to recognize itself.

“Upon my word, I believe you ‘re game,” said Muniment, looking down at him with a serious face.

“Of course you think it’s swagger, ‘self-loaf,’ as Schinkel says. But it isn’t.” Then Hyacinth asked, “In God’s name, why don’t we do something?”

“Ah, my child, to whom do you say it?” Eustache Poupin exclaimed, folding his arms despairingly.

“ Whom do you mean by ‘we’?” said Muniment.

“All the lot of us. There are plenty of them ready.”

“Ready for what? There is nothing to be done here.”

Hyacinth stared. “Then why the deuce do you come?”

“I dare say I shan’t come much more. This is a place you’ve always overestimated.”

“I wonder if I’ve overestimated you,” Hyacinth murmured, gazing at his friend.

“Don’t say that — he is going to introduce us to Hoffendahl!” Schinkel exclaimed, putting away his pipe in a receptacle almost as large as a fiddle-case.

“Should you like to see the genuine article, Robinson?” Muniment asked, with the same unusual absence of jocosity in his tone.

“The genuine article?” Hyacinth looked from one of his companions to the other.

“You have never seen it yet — though you think you have.”

“And why haven’t you shown it to me before?”

“Because I had never seen you on the stump.” This time Muniment smiled.

“Bother the stump! I was trusting you.”

“Exactly so. That gave me time.”

“Don’t come unless your mind is made up, man petit,” said Poupin.

“Are you going now — to see Hoffendahl?” Hyacinth cried.

“Don’t shout it all over the place. He wants a genteel little customer like you,” Muniment went on.

“Is it true? Are we all going?” Hyacinth demanded, eagerly.

“Yes, these two are in it; they are not very artful, but they are safe,” said Muniment, looking at Poupin and Schinkel.

“Are you the genuine article, Muniment?” asked Hyacinth, catching this look.

Muniment dropped his eyes on him; then he said, “Yes, you ‘re the boy he wants. It’s at the other end of London; we must have a growler.”

“Be calm, my child; un void!” and Eustache Poupin led Hyacinth out.

They all walked away from the Sun and Moon, and it was not for some five minutes that they encountered the fourwheeled cab which deepened so the solemnity of their expedition. After they were seated in it, Hyacinth learned that Hoffendahl was in London but for three days, was liable to hurry away on the morrow, and was accustomed to receive visits at all kinds of queer hours. It was getting to be midnight; the drive seemed interminable, to Hyacinth’s impatience and curiosity. He sat next to .Muniment, who passed his arm round him, as if by way of tacit expression of appreciation. They all ended by sitting silent, as the cab jogged along murky miles, and by the time it stopped Hyacinth had wholly lost, in the drizzling gloom, a sense of their whereabouts. you have

Book Third

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Chapter XXII

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HYACINTH got up early — an operation attended with very little effort, as he had scarcely closed his eyes all night. What he saw from his window made him dress as rapidly as a young man could do who desired more than ever that his appearance should not give strange ideas about him: an old garden, with parterres in curious figures, and little intervals of lawn which appeared to our hero's cockney vision fantastically green. At one end of the garden was a parapet of mossy brick, which looked down, on the other side, into a canal, or moat, or quaint old pond; and from the same standpoint there was also a view of a considerable part of the main body of the house (Hyacinth's room appeared to be in a wing commanding the extensive irregular back), which was richly gray wherever it was not green with ivy and other dense creepers, and everywhere infinitely like a picture, with a high-piled, ancient, russet roof, broken by huge chimneys, and queer peepholes, and all manner-of odd gables and windows on different lines,. and antique patches and protrusions, and a particularly fascinating architectural excrescence in which a wonderful clock-face was lodged — a clock-face covered with gilding and blazonry, but showing many traces of the years and the weather. Hyacinth had never in his life been in the country — the real country, as he called it, the country which was not the mere raveled fringe of London — and there entered through his open casement the breath of a world enchantingly new and, after his recent feverish hours, inexpressibly refreshing to him; a sense of sweet, sunny air and mingled odors, all strangely pure and agreeable, and a kind of musical silence, the greater part of which seemed to consist of the voices of birds. There were tall, quiet trees near by, and afar off, and everywhere; and the group of objects which greeted Hyacinth's eyes evidently formed only a corner of larger spaces and a more complicated scene. There was a world to be revealed to him: it lay waiting, with the dew upon it, under his windows, and he must go down and take his first steps in it.

The night before, at ten o'clock, when he arrived, he had only got the impression of a mile-long stretch of park, after turning in at a gate; of the cracking of gravel under the wheels of the fly; and of the glow of several windows, suggesting in-door cheer, in a facade that lifted a variety of vague pinnacles into the starlight. It was a good deal of relief to him, then, to be informed that the Princess, in consideration of the lateness of the hour, begged to be excused till the morrow; the delay would give him time to recover his balance and look about him. This latter opportunity was offered him first as he sat at supper in a vast dining-room, with the butler, whose acquaintance he had made in South Street, behind his chair. He had not exactly wondered how he would be treated — there was too much vagueness in his conception of the way in which, at a country-house, insidious distinctions might be made and shades of importance illustrated; but it was plain that the best had been ordered for him. He was, at all events, abundantly content with his reception, and more and more excited by it. The repast was delicate (though his other senses were so awake that hunger dropped out, and he ate, as it were, without eating), and the grave, mechanical servant filled his glass with a liquor that reminded him of some lines in Keats — in the Ode to a Nightingale. He wondered whether he should hear a nightingale at Medley (he knew nothing about the seasons of this vocalist), and also whether the butler would attempt to talk to him, had ideas about him, knew or suspected who he was and what; which, after all, there was no reason for his doing, unless it might be the poverty of the luggage that had been transported from Lomax Place. Mr. Withers, however (it was in this manner that Hyacinth heard him addressed by the cabman who conveyed the visitor from the station), gave no further symptom of sociability than to ask him at what time he would be called in the morning; to which our young man replied that he preferred not to be called at all — he would get up by himself. The butler rejoined, "Very good, sir," while Hyacinth thought it probable that he puzzled him a good deal, and even considered the question of giving him a glimpse of his identity, lest it should be revealed, later, in a manner less graceful. The object of this anticipatory step, in Hyacinth's mind, was that he should not be oppressed and embarrassed with attentions to which he was unused; but the idea came to nothing, for the simple reason that before he spoke he found that he already was inured to being waited upon. His impulse to deprecate attentions departed, and he became conscious that there were none he should care to miss, or was not quite prepared for. He knew he probably thanked Mr. Withers too much; but he couldn't help this — it was an irrepressible tendency and an error he should doubtless always commit.

He lay in a bed constituted in a manner so perfect to insure rest that it was probably responsible in some degree for his restlessness, and in a large, high room, where long dressing-glasses emitted ghostly glances even after the light was extinguished. Suspended on the walls were many prints, mezzotints and old engravings, which Hyacinth supposed, possibly without reason, to be fine and rare. He got up several times in the night, lighted his candle, and walked about, looking at them. He looked at himself in one of the long glasses, and in a place where everything was on such a scale it seemed to him more than ever that Mademoiselle Vivier's son

was a tiny particle. As he came downstairs he encountered housemaids, with dusters and brooms, or perceived them, through open doors, on their knees before fireplaces; and it was his belief that they regarded him more boldly than if he had been a guest of the usual kind. Such a reflection as that, however, ceased to trouble" him after he had passed out-of-doors and begun to roam through the park, into which he let himself loose at first, and then, in narrowing circles, through the nearer grounds. He rambled for an hour, in a state of simple ecstasy; brushing the dew from the deep fern and bracken and the rich borders of the garden, tasting the fragrant air, and stopping everywhere, in murmuring rapture, at the touch of some exquisite impression. His whole walk was peopled with recognitions; he had been dreaming, all his life, of just such a place and such objects, such a morning and such a chance. It was the last of April, and everything was fresh and vivid; the great trees, in the early air, were a blur of tender shoots. Round the admirable house he revolved repeatedly; catching every point and tone, feasting on its expression, and wondering whether the Princess would observe his proceedings from the window, and whether, if she did, they would be offensive to her. The house was not hers, but only hired for three months, and it could flatter no princely pride that he should be struck with it. There was something in the way the gray walls rose from the green lawn that brought tears to his eyes: the spectacle of long duration unassociated with some sordid infirmity or poverty was new to him; he had lived with people among whom old age meant, for the most part, a grudged and degraded survival. In the majestic preservation of Medley there was a kind of serenity of success, an accumulation of dignity and honor.

A footman sought him out, in the garden, to tell him that breakfast was ready. He had never thought of breakfast, and as he walked back to the house, attended by the inscrutable flunkey, this offer appeared a free, extravagant gift, unexpected and romantic. He found he was to breakfast alone, and he asked no question; but when he had finished the butler came in and informed him that the Princess would see him after luncheon, but that in the meanwhile she wished him to understand that the library was entirely at his service. "After luncheon" — that threw the hour he had come for very far into the future, and it caused him some confusion of mind that the Princess should think it worth while to invite him to stay at her house from Saturday evening to Monday morning, if it had been her purpose that so much of his visit should elapse without their meeting. But he felt neither slighted nor impatient; the impressions that had already crowded upon him were in themselves a sufficient reward, and what could one do better, precisely, in such a house as that than wait for a princess? The butler showed him the way to the library, and left him planted in the middle of it, staring at the treasures that he instantly perceived it contained. It was an old brown room, of great extent — even the ceiling was brown, though there were figures in it dimly gilt — where row upon row of finely-lettered backs looked down on the discerning youth whose trade was the handling of books, challenging him in every direction. A fire of logs crackled in a great chimney, and there were alcoves with deep window-seats; and armchairs such as he had never seen, luxurious, leather-covered, with an adjustment for holding one's volume; and a vast writing-table, before one of the windows, furnished with a perfect magazine of paper and pens, inkstands and blotters, seals, stamps, candlesticks, reels of twine, paper-weights, and book-knives. Hyacinth had never imagined so many aids to correspondence, and before he turned away he had written a note to Millicent, in a hand even more beautiful than usual — his penmanship was very minute, but at the same time wonderfully free and fair — largely for the pleasure of seeing "Medley Hall" stamped in crimson, heraldic-looking characters at the top of his paper. In the course of an hour he had ravaged the collection, taken down almost every book, wishing he could keep it a week, and put it back quickly, as his eye caught the next, which appeared even more desirable. He discovered many rare bindings, and gathered several ideas from an inspection of them — ideas which he felt himself perfectly capable of reproducing. Altogether, his vision of true happiness, at that moment, was that, for a month or two, he should be locked into the library at Medley. He forgot the outer world, and the morning waned — the beautiful vernal Sunday — while he lingered there.

He was on the top of a ladder when he heard a voice remark, "I am afraid they are very dusty; in this house, you know, it is the dust of centuries;" and, looking down, he saw Madame Grandoni stationed in the middle of the room. He instantly prepared to descend, to make her his salutation, when she exclaimed, "Stay, stay, if you-are not giddy; we can talk from here! I only came in to show you we are in the house, and to tell you to keep up your patience. The Princess will probably see you in a few hours."

"I really hope so," said Hyacinth, from his perch, rather dismayed at the "probably."

"Naturlich," the old lady rejoined: "but people have come, sometimes, and gone away without seeing her. It all depends upon her mood."

"Do you mean even when she has sent for them?"

"Oh, who can tell whether she has sent for them or not?"

"But she sent for me, you know," Hyacinth declared, staring down, and struck with the odd effect of Madame Grandoni's wig in that bird's-eye view.

"Oh yes, she sent for you, poor young man!" The old lady returned his gaze, with a smile, and they remained a moment exchanging a silent scrutiny. Then she added, "Captain Sholto has come, like that, more than once; and he has gone away no better off."

"Captain Sholto?" Hyacinth repeated.

"Very true, if we talk at this distance, I must shut the door." She took her way back to it (she had left it open), and pushed it to; then advanced into the room again, with her superannuated, shuffling step, walking as if her shoes were too big for her. Hyacinth meanwhile descended the ladder. "Ecco. She's a capricciosa," said

the old lady.

"I don't understand how you speak of her," Hyacinth remarked, gravely. "You seem to be her friend, yet you say things that are not favorable to her."

"Dear young man, I say much worse to her about herself than I should ever say to you. I am rude, oh yes — even to you, to whom, no doubt, I ought to be particularly kind. But I am not false. It is not our German nature. You will hear me some day. I am the friend of the Princess; it would be well enough if she never had a worse one! But I should like to be yours, too — what will you have? Perhaps it is of no use. At any rate, here you are."

"Yes, here I am, decidedly!" Hyacinth laughed, uneasily.

"And how long shall you stay? Excuse me if I ask that; it is part of my rudeness."

"I shall stay till tomorrow morning. I must be at my work by noon."

"That will do very well. Don't you remember, the other time, how I told you to remain faithful?"

"That was very good advice. But I think you exaggerate my danger."

"So much the better," said Madame Grandoni; "though now that I look at you well I doubt it a little. I see you are one of those types that ladies like. I can be sure of that, because I like you myself. At my age — a hundred and twenty — can I not say that? If the Princess were to do so, it would be different; remember that — that any flattery she may ever offer you will be on her lips much less discreet. But perhaps she will never have the chance; you may never come again. There are people who have come only once. Ve-dremo bene. I must tell you that I am not in the least against a young man taking a holiday, a little quiet recreation, once in a while," Madame Grandoni continued, in her disconnected, discursive, confidential way. "In Rome they take it every five days; that is, no doubt, too often. In Germany, less often. In this country, I cannot understand whether it is an increase of effort: the English Sunday is so difficult! This one will, however, in any case, have been beautiful for you. Be happy, make yourself comfortable; but go home tomorrow!" And with this injunction Madame Grandoni took her way again to the door, while Haycinth went to open it for her. "I can say that, because it is not my house. I am only here like you. And sometimes I think I also shall go tomorrow!"

"I imagine you have not, like me, your living to get, every day. That is reason enough for me," said Hyacinth.

She paused in the doorway, with her expressive, ugly, kindly little eyes on his face. "I believe I am nearly as poor as you. And I have not, like you, the appearance of nobility. Yet I am noble," said the old lady, shaking her wig.

"And I am not!" Hyacinth rejoined, smiling.

"It is better not to be lifted up high, like our friend. It does not give happiness."

"Not to one's self, possibly; but to others!" From where they stood, Hyacinth looked out into the great paneled and decorated hall, lighted from above and roofed with a faraway dim fresco, and the reflection of this grandeur came into his appreciative eyes.

"Do you admire everything here very much — do you receive great pleasure?" asked Madame Grandoni.

"Oh, so much — so much!"

She considered him a moment longer. "Poverino!" she murmured, as she turned away.

A couple of hours later the Princess sent for Hyacinth, and he was conducted upstairs, through corridors carpeted with crimson and hung with pictures, and ushered into a kind of bright drawingroom, which he afterwards learned that his hostess regarded as her boudoir. The sound of music had come to him outside the door, so that he was prepared to find her seated at the piano, if not to see her continue to play after he appeared. Her face was turned in the direction from which he entered, and she smiled at him while the servant, as if he had just arrived, formally pronounced his name, without lifting her hands from the keys. The room, placed in an angle of the house and lighted from two sides, was large and sunny, upholstered in fresh, gay chintz, furnished with all sorts of sofas and low, familiar seats and convenient little tables, most of them holding great bowls of early flowers, littered over with books, newspapers, magazines, photographs of celebrities and other people, and full of the signs of luxurious and rather indolent habitation. Hyacinth stood there, not advancing very far, and the Princess, still playing and smiling, nodded toward a seat near the piano. "Put yourself there and listen to me." Hyacinth obeyed, and she played a long time, without glancing at him. This left him the more free to rest his eyes on her own face and person, while she looked about the room, vaguely, absently, but with an expression of quiet happiness, as if she were lost in her music, soothed and pacified by it. A window near her was half open, and the soft clearness of the day and all the odor of the spring diffused themselves, and made the place cheerful and pure. The Princess struck him as extraordinarily young and fair, and she seemed so slim and simple, and friendly too, in spite of having neither abandoned her occupation nor offered him her hand, that he sank back in his seat at last, with the sense that all his uneasiness, his nervous tension, was leaving him, and that he was safe in her kindness, in the free, original way with which she evidently would always treat him. This peculiar manner, half of ceremony, half of fellowship, seemed to him already to have the sweetness of familiarity. She played ever so movingly, with different pieces succeeding each other; he had never listened to music, nor to a talent, of that order. Two or three times she turned her eyes upon him, and then they shone with the wonderful expression that was the essence of her beauty; that profuse, mingled light which seemed to belong to some everlasting summer, and yet to suggest seasons-that were past and gone, some experience that was only an exquisite memory. She asked

him if he cared for music, and then added, laughing, that she ought to have made sure of this before; while he answered (he had already told her so in South Street; she appeared to have forgotten this) that he was awfully fond of it.

The sense of the beauty of women had been given to our young man in a high degree; it was a faculty that made him conscious, to adoration, of every element of loveliness, every delicacy of feature, every shade and tone, that contributed to charm. Even, therefore, if he had appreciated less the deep harmonies the Princess drew from the piano, there would have been no lack of interest in his situation, in such an opportunity to watch her admirable outline and movement, the noble form of her head and face, the gathered-up glories of her hair, the living, flowerlike freshness which had no need to turn from the light. She was dressed in light colors, as simply as a young girl. Before she ceased playing she asked Hyacinth what he would like to do in the afternoon: would he have any objection to taking a drive with her? It was very possible he might enjoy the country. She seemed not to attend to his answer, which was covered by the sound of the piano; but if she had done so it would have left her very little doubt as to the reality of his inclination. She remained gazing at the cornice of the room, while her hands wandered to and fro; then, suddenly, she stopped, got up, and came toward her companion. “It is probable that is the most I shall ever bore you; you know the worst. Would you very kindly close the piano?” He complied with her request, and she went to another part of the room and sank into an armchair. When he approached her again she said, “Is it really true that you have never seen a park, nor a garden, nor any of the beauties of nature, and that sort of thing?” She was alluding to something he had said in his letter, when he answered the note by which she proposed to him to run down to Medley; and after he assured her that it was perfectly true, she exclaimed, “I’m so glad — I’m so glad! I have never been able to show any one anything new, and I have always thought I should like it so — especially to a sensitive nature. Then you will come and drive with me?” She asked this as if it would be a great favor.

That was the beginning of the communion — so singular, considering their respective positions — which he had come to Medley to enjoy; and it passed into some very remarkable phases. The Princess had the most extraordinary way of taking things for granted, of ignoring difficulties, of assuming that her preferences might be translated into fact. After Hyacinth had remained with her ten minutes longer — a period mainly occupied with “her exclamations of delight at his having seen so little of the sort of thing of which Medley consisted (“Where should he have seen it, gracious heaven? he asked himself); after she had rested, thus briefly, from her exertions at the piano, she proposed that they should go out-of-doors together. She was an immense walker — she wanted her walk. She left him for a short time, giving him the last number of the Revue des Deux Mondes to entertain himself withal, and calling his attention, in particular, to a story of M. Octave Feuillet (she should be so curious to know what he thought of it); and reappeared with her hat and parasol, drawing on her long gloves, and presenting herself to our young man, at that moment, as a sudden incarnation of the heroine of M. Feuillet’s novel, in which he had instantly become immersed. On their way downstairs it occurred to her that he had not yet seen the house, and that it would be amusing for her to show it to him; so she turned aside and took him through it, up and down and everywhere, even into the vast, old-fashioned kitchen, where there was a small, red-faced man in a white jacket and apron and a white cap (he removed the latter ornament to salute the little bookbinder), with whom his companion spoke Italian, which Hyacinth understood sufficiently to perceive that she addressed her cook in the second person singular, as if he had been a feudal retainer. He remembered that was the way the three Musketeers spoke to their lackeys. The Princess explained that the gentleman in the white cap was a delightful creature (she couldn’t endure English servants, though she was obliged to have two or three), who would make her plenty of risottos and polentas — she had quite the palate of a contadina. She showed Hyacinth everything: the queer transmogrified corner that had once been a chapel; the secret stairway which had served in the persecutions of the Catholics (the owners of Medley were, like the Princess herself, of the old persuasion); the musicians’ gallery, over the hall; the tapestried room, which people came from a distance to see; and the haunted chamber (the two were sometimes confounded, but they were quite distinct), where a dreadful individual at certain times made his appearance — a dwarfish ghost, with an enormous head, a dispossessed brother, of long ago (the eldest), who had passed for an idiot, which he wasn’t, and had somehow been made away with. The Princess offered her visitor the privilege of sleeping in this apartment, declaring, however, that nothing would induce her even to enter it alone, she being a benighted creature, consumed with abject superstitions. “I don’t know whether I am religious, and whether, if I were, my religion would be superstitious. But my superstitions are certainly religious.” She made her young friend pass through the drawingroom very cursorily, remarking that they should see it again: it was rather stupid — drawing - rooms in English country-houses were always stupid; indeed, if it would amuse him, they would sit there after dinner. Madame Grandoni and she usually sat upstairs, but they would do anything that he should find more comfortable.

At last they went out of the house together, and as they did so she explained, as if she wished to justify herself against the imputation of extravagance, that, though the place doubtless struck him as absurdly large for a couple of quiet women, and the whole thing was not in the least what she would have preferred, yet it was all far cheaper than he probably imagined; she would never have looked at it if it hadn’t been cheap. It must appear to him so preposterous for a woman to associate herself with the great uprising of the poor, and yet live in palatial halls — a place with forty or fifty rooms. This was one of only two allusions she made that

day to her democratic sympathies; but it fell very happily, for Hyacinth had been reflecting precisely upon the anomaly she mentioned. It had been present to him all day; it added much to the way life practiced on his sense of the tragic-comical to think of the Princess's having retired to that magnificent residence in order to concentrate her mind upon the London slums. He listened, therefore, with great attention while she related that she had taken the house for only three months, in any case, because she wanted to rest, after a winter of visiting and living in public (as the English spent their lives, with all their celebrated worship of the "home"), and yet didn't wish as yet to return to town — though she was obliged to confess that she had still the place in South Street on her hands, thanks to her deciding, unexpectedly, to go on with it, rather than move out her things. But one had to keep one's things somewhere, and why wasn't that as good a receptacle as another? Medley was not what she would have chosen if she had been left to herself: but she had not been left to herself — she never was; she had been bullied into taking it by the owners, whom she had met somewhere, and who had made up to her immensely, persuading her that she might really have it for nothing — for no more than she would give for the little honeysuckle cottage, the old parsonage embowered in clematis, which were really what she had been looking for. Besides, it was one of those old musty mansions, ever so far from town, which it was always difficult to let, or to get a price for; and then it was a wretched house for living in. Hyacinth, for whom his three hours in the train had been a series of happy throbs, had not been struck with its geographical remoteness, and he asked the Princess what she meant, in such a connection, by using the word "wretched." To this she replied that the place was tumbling to pieces, inconvenient in every respect, full of ghosts and bad smells. "That is the only reason I come to have it. I don't want you to think me more luxurious than I am, or that I throw away money. Never, never!" Hyacinth had no standard by which he could measure the importance his opinion would have for her, and he perceived that though she judged him as a creature still open to every initiation, whose naivete would entertain her, it was also her fancy to treat him as an old friend, a person to whom she might have had the habit of referring her difficulties. Her performance of the part she had undertaken to play was certainly complete, and everything lay before him but the reason she had for playing it.

One of the gardens at Medley took the young man's heart beyond the others: it had high brick walls, on the sunny sides of which was a great training of apricots and plums, and straight walks, bordered with old-fashioned, homely flowers, inclosing immense squares where other fruit-trees stood upright and mint and lavender floated in the air. In the southern quarter it overhung a small, disused canal, and here a high embankment had been raised, which was also long and broad and covered with fine turf; so that the top of it, looking down at the canal, made a magnificent grassy terrace, than which, on a summer's day, there could be no more delightful place for strolling up and down with a companion — all the more that, at either end, was a curious pavilion, in the manner of a teahouse, which completed the scene in an old-world sense, and offered rest and privacy, a refuge from sun or shower. One of these pavilions was an asylum for gardener's tools and superfluous flowerpots; the other was covered, inside, with a queer Chinese paper, representing ever so many times over a group of people, with faces like blind kittens, having tea while they sat on the floor. It also contained a big, clumsy inlaid cabinet, in which cups and saucers showed themselves through doors of greenish glass, together with a carved cocoanut and a pair of outlandish idols. On a shelf, over a sofa, not very comfortable, though it had cushions of faded tapestry, which looked like samplers, was a row of novels, out of date and out of print — novels that one couldn't have found any more, and that were only there. On the chimneypiece was a bowl of dried rose-leaves, mixed with some aromatic spice, and the whole place suggested a certain dampness.

On the terrace Hyacinth paced to and fro with the Princess, until she suddenly remembered that he had not had his luncheon. He protested that this was the last thing he wished to think of, but she declared that she had not asked him down to Medley to starve him, and that he must go back and be fed. They went back, but by a very roundabout way, through the park, so that they really had half an hour's more talk. She explained to him that she herself breakfasted at twelve o'clock, in the foreign fashion, and had tea in the afternoon; as he too was so foreign, he might like that better, and in this case, on the morrow, they would breakfast together. He could have coffee, and anything else he wanted, brought to his room when he woke up. When Hyacinth had sufficiently composed himself, in the presence of this latter image — he thought he saw a footman arranging a silver service at his bedside — he mentioned that really, as regarded the morrow, he should have to be back in London. There was a train at nine o'clock; he hoped she didn't mind his taking it. She looked at him a moment, gravely and kindly, as if she were considering an abstract idea, and then she said, "Oh, yes, I mind it very much. Not tomorrow — some other day." He made no rejoinder, and the Princess spoke of something else; that is, his rejoinder was private, and consisted of the reflection that he would leave Medley in the morning, whatever she might say. He simply couldn't afford to stay; he couldn't be out of work. And then Madame Grandoni thought it so important; for though the old lady was obscure, she was decidedly impressive. The Princess's protest, however, was to be reckoned with; he felt that it might take a form less cursory than the words she had just uttered, which would make it embarrassing. She was less solemn, less explicit, than Madame Grandoni had been, but there was something in her slight seriousness and the delicate way in which she signified a sort of command that seemed to tell him his liberty was going — the liberty he had managed to keep (till the other day, when he gave Hoffendahl a mortgage on it), and the possession of which had in some degree consoled him for other forms of penury. This made him uneasy; what would become of him if he should

add another servitude to the one he had undertaken, at the end of that long, anxious cab-drive in the rain, in that dim back bedroom of a house as to whose whereabouts he was even now not clear, while Muniment and Poupin and Schinkel, all visibly pale, listened and accepted the vow? Muniment and Poupiu and Schinkel — how disconnected, all the same, he felt from them at the present hour; how little he was the young man who had made the pilgrimage in the cab; and how the two latter, at least, if they could have a glimpse of him now, would wonder what he was up to!

As to this, Hyacinth wondered sufficiently himself, while the Princess touched upon the people and places she had seen, the impressions and conclusions she had gathered, since their former meeting. It was to such matters as these that she directed the conversation; she appeared to wish to keep it off his own concerns, and he was surprised at her continued avoidance of the slums and the question of her intended sacrifices. She mentioned none of her friends by name, but she talked of their character, their houses, their manners, taking for granted, as before, that Hyacinth would always follow. So far as he followed he was edified, but he had to admit to himself that half the time he didn't know what she was talking about. At all events, if he had been with the dukes (she didn't call her associates dukes, but Hyacinth was sure they were of that order), he would have got more satisfaction from them. She appeared, on the whole, to judge the English world severely; to think poorly of its wit, and even worse of its morals. "You know people oughtn't to be both corrupt and dull," she said; and Hyacinth turned this over, feeling that he certainly had not yet caught the point of view of a person for whom the aristocracy was a collection of bores. He had sometimes taken great pleasure in hearing that it was fabulously profligate, but he was rather disappointed in the bad account the Princess gave of it. She remarked that she herself was very corrupt — she ought to have mentioned that before — but she had never been accused of being stupid. Perhaps he would discover it, but most of the people she had had to do with thought her only too lively. The second allusion that she made to their ulterior designs (Hyacinth's and hers) was when she said, "I determined to see it" — she was speaking still of English society— "to learn for myself what it really is, before we blow it up. I have been here now a year and a half, and, as I tell you, I feel that I have seen. It is the old regime again, the rottenness and extravagance, bristling with every iniquity and every abuse, over which the French Revolution passed like a whirlwind; or, perhaps, even more a reproduction of Roman society in its decadence, gouty, apoplectic, depraved, gorged, and clogged with wealth and spoils, selfishness and skepticism, and waiting for the onset of the barbarians. You and I are the barbarians, you know." The Princess was pretty general, after all, in her animadversions, and regaled him with no anecdotes (he rather missed them) that would have betrayed the hospitality she had enjoyed. She couldn't treat him absolutely as if he had been an ambassador. By way of defending the aristocracy, he said to her that it couldn't be true they were all a bad lot (he used that expression because she had let him know that she liked him to speak in the manner of the people), inasmuch as he had an acquaintance among them — a noble lady — who was one of the purest, kindest, most conscientious human beings it was possible to imagine. At this she stopped short and looked at him; then she asked, "Whom do you mean — a noble lady?"

"I suppose there is no harm saying. Lady Aurora Langrish."

"I don't know her. Is she nice?"

"I like her ever so much."

"Is she pretty, clever?"

"She isn't pretty, but she is very uncommon," said Hyacinth.

"How did you make her acquaintance?" As he hesitated, she went on: "Did you bind some books for her?"

"No. I met her in a place called Audley Court."

"Where is that?"

"In South Lambeth."

"And who lives there?"

"A young woman I was calling on, who is bedridden."

"And the lady you speak of — what do you call her? Lydia Langrish? — goes to see her?"

"Yes, very often."

The Princess was silent a moment, looking at him. "Will you take me there?"

"With great pleasure. The young woman I speak of is the sister of the chemist's assistant you will perhaps remember that I mentioned to you."

"Yes, I remember. It must be one of the first places we go to. I am sorry," the Princess added, walking on. Hyacinth inquired what she might be sorry for, but she took no notice of his question, and presently remarked, "Perhaps she goes to see him."

"Goes to see whom?"

"The chemist's assistant — the brother." She said this very seriously.

"Perhaps she does," Hyacinth rejoined, laughing. "But she is a fine sort of woman."

The Princess repeated that she was sorry, and he again asked her for what — for Lady Aurora's being of that sort? To which she replied, "No; I mean for my not being the first — what is it you call them? — noble lady that you have encountered."

"I don't see what difference that makes. You needn't be afraid you don't make an impression on me."

"I was not thinking-of that. I was thinking that you might be less fresh than I thought."

"Of course I don't know what you thought," said Hyacinth, smiling.

“No; how should you?”

Chapter XXIII

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HE WAS IN THE library, after luncheon, when word was brought to him that the carriage was at the door, for their drive; and when he went into the hall he found Madame Grandoni, bonneted and cloaked, awaiting the descent of the Princess. “You see I go with you. I am always there,” she remarked, jovially. “The Princess has me with her to take care of her, and this is how I do it. Besides, I never miss my drive.”

“You are different from me; this will be the first I have ever had in my life.” He could establish that distinction without bitterness, because he was too pleased with his prospect to believe the old lady’s presence could spoil it. He had nothing to say to the Princess that she might not hear. He didn’t dislike her for coming, even after she had said to him, in answer to his own announcement, speaking rather more sententiously than was her wont, “It doesn’t surprise me that you have not spent your life in carriages. They have nothing to do with your trade.”

“Fortunately not,” he answered. “I should have made a ridiculous coachman.”

The Princess appeared, and they mounted into a great square barouche, an old-fashioned, high-hung vehicle, with a green body, a faded hammer-cloth, and a rumble where the footman sat (the Princess mentioned that it had been let with the house), which roiled, ponderously and smoothly, along the winding avenue and through the gilded gates (they were surmounted with an immense escutcheon) of the park. The progress of this oddly composed trio had a high respectability, and that is one of the reasons why Hyacinth felt the occasion to be tremendously memorable. There might still be greater joys in store for him — he was by this time quite at sea, and could recognize no shores — but he would never again in his life be so respectable. The drive was long and comprehensive, but very little was said while it lasted. “I shall show you the whole country: it is exquisitely beautiful; it speaks to the heart.” Of so much as this his hostess had informed him at the start; and she added, in French, with a light, allusive nod at the rich, harmonized landscape, “Voila ce que j’aime en Angleterre.” For the rest, she sat there opposite to him in quiet fairness under her softly-swaying, lace-fringed parasol: moving her eyes to where she noticed that his eyes rested; allowing them, when the carriage passed anything particularly charming, to meet his own; smiling as if she enjoyed the whole affair very nearly as much as he; and now and then calling his attention to some prospect, some picturesque detail, by three words of which the cadence was sociable. Madame Grandoni dozed most of the time, with her chin resting on a rather mangy ermine tippet, in which she had enveloped herself, expanding into consciousness at moments, however, to greet the scenery with comfortable polyglot ejaculations. If Hyacinth was exalted, during these delightful hours, he at least measured his exaltation, and it kept him almost solemnly still, as if with the fear that a wrong movement of any sort would break the charm, cause the curtain to fall upon the play. This was especially the case when his senses oscillated back from the objects that sprang up by the way, every one of which was a rich image of something he had longed for, to the most beautiful woman in England, who sat there, close to him, as completely for his benefit as if he had been a painter engaged to make her portrait. More than once he saw everything through a mist; his eyes were full of tears.

That evening they sat in the drawingroom after dinner, as the Princess had promised, or, as he was inclined to consider it, threatened him. The force of the threat was in his prevision that the ladies would make themselves fine, and that in contrast with the setting and company he should feel dingier than ever; having already on his back the only tolerably decent coat he possessed, and being unable to exchange it for a garment of the pattern that civilized people (so much he knew, if he couldn’t emulate them) put on about eight o’clock. The ladies, when they came to dinner, looked festal indeed; but Hyacinth was able to make the reflection that he was more pleased to be dressed as he was dressed, meanly and unsuitably as it was, than he should have been to present such a figure as Madame Grandoni, in whose toggery there was something comical. He was coming more and more round to the sense that if the Princess didn’t mind his poorness, in every way, he had no call to mind it himself. His present circumstances were not of his seeking — they had been forced upon him; they were not the fruit of a disposition to push. How little the Princess minded — how much, indeed, she enjoyed the consciousness that in having him about her in that manner she was playing a trick upon society, the false and conventional society she had measured and despised — was manifest from the way she had introduced him to the people they found awaiting them in the hall on the return from their drive: four ladies, a mother and three daughters, who had come over to call, from Broome, a place some five miles off. Broome was also a great house, as he gathered, and Lady Marchant, the mother, was the wife of a county magnate. She explained that they had come in on the persuasion of the butler, who had represented the return of the Princess as imminent, and who then had administered tea without waiting for this event. The evening had drawn in chill; there was a fire in the hall, and they all sat near it, round the tea-table, under the great roof which rose to the top of the house. Hyacinth conversed mainly with one of the daughters, a very fine girl, with a straight back and long arms, whose neck was encircled so tightly with a fur boa that, to look a little to one side, she was obliged to move her whole body. She had a handsome, inanimate face, over which the firelight

played without making it more lively, a beautiful voice, and the occasional command of a few words. She asked Hyacinth if he had been hunting, and whether he went in much for croquet, and she ate three muffins.

Our young man perceived that Lady Marchant and her daughters had already been at Medley, and even guessed that their reception by the Princess, who probably thought them of a tiresome type, had not been enthusiastic; and his imagination projected itself, further still, into the motives which, in spite of this tepidity, must have led them, in consideration of the rarity of princesses in that country, to come a second time. The talk, in the firelight, while Hyacinth labored, rather recklessly (for the spirit of the occasion, on his hostess's part, was passing into his own blood), with his muffin-eating beauty — the conversation, accompanied with the light click of delicate teacups, was as well-bred as could be consistent with an odd, evident parti-pris of the Princess's to make poor Lady Marchant explain everything. With great urbanity of manner, she professed complete inability to understand the sense in which her visitor meant her thin remarks; and Hyacinth was scarcely able to follow her here, he wondered so what interest she could have in trying to appear dense. It was only afterwards he learned that the Marchant family produced a very peculiar, and at moments almost maddening, effect upon her nerves. He asked himself what would happen to that member of it with whom he was engaged if it should be revealed to her that she was conversing (how little-soever) with a beggarly London artisan; and though he was rather pleased at her not having discovered his station (for he didn't attribute her shortness to this idea), he entertained a little the question of its being perhaps his duty not to keep it hidden from her, not to flourish in a cowardly disguise. What did she take him for — or, rather, what didn't she take him for — when she asked him if he hunted? Perhaps that was because it was rather dark; if there had been more light in the great, vague hall she would have seen he was not one of themselves. Hyacinth felt that by this time he had associated a good deal with swells, but they had always known what he was, and had been able to elect how to treat him. This was the first occasion on which a young gentlewoman had not been warned, and, as a consequence, he appeared to pass muster. He determined not to unmask himself, on the simple ground that he should by the same stroke betray the Princess. It was quite open to her to lean over and say to Miss Marchant, "You know he's a wretched little bookbinder, earning a few shillings a week in a horrid street in Soho. There are all kinds of low things — and I suspect even something very horrible — connected with his birth. It seems to me I ought to mention it." He almost wished she would mention it, for the sake of the strange, violent sensations of the thing, a curiosity quivering within him to know what Miss Marchant would do at such a pinch, and what chorus of ejaculations — or, what appalled, irremediable silence — would rise to the painted roof. The responsibility, however, was not his; he had entered a phase of his destiny where responsibilities were suspended. Madame Grandoni's tea had waked her up; she came, at every crisis, to the rescue of the conversation, and talked to the visitors about Rome, where they had once spent a winter, describing with much drollery the manner in which the English families she had seen there for nearly half a century (and had met, of an evening, in the Roman world) inspected the ruins and monuments and squeezed into the great ceremonies of the church. Clearly, the four ladies didn't know what to make of her; but, though they perhaps wondered if she were a paid companion, they were on firm ground in the fact that the queer, familiar, fat person had been acquainted with the Millingtons, the Bunburys, and the Tripps.

After dinner (during which the Princess allowed herself a considerable license of pleasantry on the subject of her recent visitors, declaring that Hyacinth must positively go with her to return their call, and must see their interior, their manner at home), Madame Grandoni sat down to the piano, at Christina's request, and played to her companions for an hour. The spaces were large in the big drawingroom, and our friends had placed themselves at a distance from each other. The old lady's music trickled forth discreetly into the pleasant dimness of the candlelight; she knew dozens of Italian local airs, which sounded like the forgotten tunes of a people, and she followed them by a series of tender, plaintive German Lieder, awaking, without violence, the echoes of the high, pompous apartment. It was the music of an old woman, and seemed to quaver a little, as her singing might have done. The Princess, buried in a deep chair, listened, behind her fan. Hyacinth at least supposed she listened; at any rate, she never moved. At last Madame Grandoni left the piano, and came toward the young man. She had taken up, on the way, a French book, in a pink cover, which she nursed in the hollow of her arm, and she stood looking at Hyacinth.

"My poor little friend, I must bid you goodnight. I shall not see you again for the present, as, to take your early train, you will have left the house before I put on my wig — and I never show myself to gentlemen without it. I have looked after the Princess pretty well, all day, to keep her from harm, and now I give her up to you, for a little. Take the same care, I beg you. I must put myself into my dressing-gown; at my age, at this hour, it is the only thing. What will you have? I hate to be tight," pursued Madame Grandoni, who appeared even in her ceremonial garment to have evaded this discomfort successfully enough. "Do not sit up late," she added; "and do not keep him, Christina. Remember that for an active young man like Mr. Robinson, going every day to his work, there is nothing more exhausting than such an unoccupied life as ours. For what do we do, after all? His eyes are very heavy. Bastd!"

During this little address the Princess, who made no rejoinder to that part of it which concerned herself, remained hidden behind her fan; but after Madame Grandoni had wandered away she lowered this emblazoned shield, and rested her eyes for a while on Hyacinth. At last she said, "Don't sit half a mile off. Come nearer to me. I want to say something to you that I can't shout across the room." Hyacinth instantly got up, but at the same moment she also rose; so that, approaching each other, they met halfway, before the great

marble chimneypiece. She stood a little, opening and closing her fan; then she remarked, “You must be surprised at my not having yet spoken to you about our great interest.”

“No, indeed, I am not surprised at anything.”

“When you take that tone I feel as If we should never, after all, become friends,” said the Princess.

“I hoped we were, already. Certainly, after the kindness you have shown me, there is no service of friendship that you might ask of me” —

“That you wouldn’t gladly perform? I know what you are going to say, and have no doubt you speak truly. But what good would your service do me if, all the while, you think of me as a hollow-headed, hollow-hearted lunatic, behaving in the worst possible taste, and oppressing you with her attentions? Perhaps you can think of me as — what shall I call it? — as a kind of coquette.”

Hyacinth demurred. “That would be very conceited.”

“Surely, you have the right to be as conceited as you please, after the advances I have made you! Pray, who has a better one? But you persist in remaining humble, and that is very provoking.”

“It is not I that am provoking; it is life, and society, and all the difficulties that surround us.”

“I am precisely of that opinion — that they are exasperating; that when I appeal to you, frankly, candidly, disinterestedly — simply because I like you, for no other reason in the world — to help me to disregard and surmount these obstructions, to treat them with the contempt they deserve, you drop your eyes, you even blush a little, and make yourself small, and try to edge out of the situation by pleading general devotion and insignificance. Please remember this: you cease to be insignificant from the moment I have anything to do with you. My dear fellow,” the Princess went on, in her free, audacious, fraternizing way, to which her beauty and purity gave nobleness, “there are people who would be very glad to enjoy, in your place, that form of obscurity.”

“What do you wish me to do?” Hyacinth asked, as quietly as he could.

If he had had an idea that this question, to which, as coming from his lips, and even as being uttered with perceptible impatience, a certain unexpectedness might attach, would cause her a momentary embarrassment, he was completely out in his calculation. She answered on the instant: “I want you to give me time! That’s all I ask of my friends, in general — all I ever asked of the best I have had. But none of them ever did it; none of them, that is, save the excellent creature who has just left us. She understood me long ago.”

“That’s all I, on my side, ask of you,” said Hyacinth, smiling. “Give me time, give me time,” he murmured, looking up at her splendor.

“Dear Mr. Hyacinth, I have given you months! — months since our first meeting. And at present, haven’t I given you the whole day? It has been intentional, my not speaking to you of our plans. Yes, our plans; I know what I am saying. Don’t try to look stupid; you will never succeed. I wished to leave you free to amuse yourself.”

“Oh, I have amused myself,” said Hyacinth.

“You would have been very fastidious if you hadn’t! However, that is precisely, in the first place, what I wished you to come here for. To observe the impression made by such a place as this on such a nature as yours, introduced to it for the first time, has been, I assure you, quite worth my while. I have already given you a hint of how extraordinary I think it that you should be what you are without having seen — what shall I call them? — beautiful, delightful old things. I have been watching you; I am frank enough to tell you that. I want you to see more — more — more!” the Princess exclaimed, with a sudden flicker of passion. “And I want to talk with you about this matter, as well as others. That will be for tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“I noticed Madame Grandoni took for granted, just now, you are going. But that has nothing to do with the business. She has so little imagination!”

Hyacinth shook his head, smiling. “I can’t stay!” He had an idea his mind was made up.

She returned his smile, but there was something strangely touching — it was so sad, yet, as a rebuke, so gentle — in the tone in which she replied, “You oughtn’t to force me to beg you. It isn’t nice.”

He had reckoned without that tone; all his reasons suddenly seemed to fall from under him, to liquefy. He remained a moment, looking on the ground; then he said, “Princess, you have no idea — how should you have? — into the midst of what abject, pitiful preoccupations you thrust yourself. I have no money — I have no clothes.”

“What do you want of money? This isn’t an hotel.”

“Every day I stay here I lose a day’s wages; and I live on my “wages from day to day.”

“Let me, then, give you wages. You will work for me.”

“What do you mean — work for you?”

“You will bind all my books. I have ever so many foreign ones, in paper.”

“You speak as if I had brought my tools!”

“No, I don’t imagine that. I will give you the wages now, and you can do the work, at your leisure and convenience, afterwards. Then, if you want anything, you can go over to Bonchester and buy it. There are very good shops; I have used them.” Hyacinth thought of a great many things at this juncture; the Princess had that quickening effect upon him. Among others, he thought of these two: first, that it was indelicate (though such an opinion was not very strongly held either in Lomax Place or in Soho) to accept money from a woman; and

second, that it was still more indelicate to make such a woman as that go down on her knees to him. But it took more than a minute for one of these convictions to prevail over the other, and before that he had heard the Princess continue, in the tone of mild, disinterested argument: “If we believe in the coming democracy, if it seems to us right and just, and we hold that, in sweeping over the world, the great wave will wash away a myriad iniquities and cruelties, why not make some attempt, with our own poor means — for one must begin somewhere — to carry out the spirit of it in our lives and our manners? I want to do that. I try to do it — in my relations with you, for instance. But you hang back; you are not democratic!”

The Princess accusing him of a patrician offishness was a very fine stroke; nevertheless, it left him lucidity enough (though he still hesitated an instant, wondering whether the words would not offend her) to say, with a smile, “I have been strongly warned against you.”

The offense seemed not to touch her. “I can easily understand that. Of course my proceedings — though, after all, I have done little enough as yet — must appear most unnatural. Che vuole? as Madame Grandoni says.”

A certain knot of light blue ribbon, which formed part of the trimming of her dress, hung down, at her side, in the folds of it. On these glossy loops Hyacinth’s eyes happened for a moment to have rested, and he now took one of them up and carried it to his lips. “I will do all the work for you that you will give me. If you give it on purpose, by way of munificence, that is your own affair. I myself will estimate the price. What decides me is that I shall do it so well; at least it shall be better than any one else can do — so that if you employ me there will have been that reason. I have brought you a book — so you can see. I did it for you last year, and went to South Street to give it to you, but you had already gone.”

“Give it to me tomorrow.” These words appeared to express so exclusively the calmness of relief at finding that he could be reasonable, as well as that of a friendly desire to see the proof of his talent, that he was surprised when she said, in the next breath, irrelevantly, “Who was it warned you against me?”

He feared she might suppose he meant Madame Grandoni, so he made the plainest answer, having no desire to betray the old lady, and reflecting that, as the likelihood was small that his friend in South Lambeth would ever consent to meet the Princess (in spite of her plan of going there), no one would be hurt by it. “A friend of mine in London — Paul Muniment.”

“Paul Muniment?”

“I think I mentioned him to you the first time we met.”

“The person who said something good? I forget what it was.”

“It was sure to be something good if he said it; he is very wise.”

“That makes his warning very flattering to me! What does he know about me?”

“Oh, nothing, of course, except the little that I could tell him. He only spoke on general grounds.”

“I like his name — Paul Muniment,” the Princess said. “If he resembles it, I think I should like him.”

“You would like him much better than me.”

“How do you know how much — or how little — I like you? I am determined to keep hold of you, simply for what you can show me.” She paused a moment, with her beautiful, intelligent eyes smiling into his own, and then she continued, “On general grounds, Men entendu. Your friend was quite right to warn you. Now those general grounds are just what I have undertaken to make as small as possible. It is to reduce them to nothing that I talk to you, that I conduct myself with regard to you as I have done. What in the world is it I am trying to do but, by every device that my ingenuity suggests, fill up the inconvenient gulf that yawns between my position and yours? You know what I think of ‘positions;’ I told you in London. For Heaven’s sake, let me feel that I have — a little — succeeded!” Hyacinth satisfied her sufficiently to enable her, five minutes later, apparently to entertain no further doubt on the question of his staying over. On the contrary, she burst into a sudden ebullition of laughter, exchanging her bright, lucid insistence for one of her singular sallies. “You must absolutely go with me to call on the Marchants; it will be too delightful to see you there!”

As he walked up and down the empty drawingroom it occurred to him to ask himself whether that was mainly what she was keeping him for — so that he might help her to play one of her tricks on the good people at Broome. He paced there, in the still candlelight, for a longer time than he measured; until the butler came and stood in the doorway, looking at him silently and fixedly, as if to let him know that he interfered with the custom of the house. He had told the Princess that what determined him was the thought of the manner in which he might exercise his craft in her service; but this was only half the influence that pressed him into forgetfulness of what he had most said to himself when, in Lomax Place, in an hour of unprecedented introspection, he wrote the letter by which he accepted the invitation to Medley. He would go there (so he said), because a man must be gallant, especially if he is a little bookbinder; but after he should be there he would insist at every step upon knowing what he was in for. The change that had taken place in him now, from one Moment to another, was that he had simply ceased to care what he was in for. All warnings, reflections, considerations of verisimilitude, of the delicate, the natural, and the possible, of the value of his independence, had become as nothing to him. The cup of an exquisite experience — a week in that enchanted palace, a week of such immunity from Lomax Place and old Crookenden as he had never dreamed of — was at his lips; it was purple with the wine of novelty, of civilization, and he couldn’t push it aside without drinking. He might go home ashamed, but he would have forevermore, in his mouth, the taste of nectar. He went upstairs, under the eye of the butler, and on his way to his room, at the turning of a corridor, found himself

face to face with Madame Grandoni. She had apparently just issued from her own apartment, the door of which stood open, near her; she might have been hovering there in expectation of his footstep. She had donned her dressing-gown, which appeared to give her every facility for respiration, but she had not yet parted With her wig. She still had her pink French book under her arm; and her fat little hands tightly locked together in front of her formed, as it were, the clasp of her generous girdle.

"Do tell me it is positive, Mr. Robinson!" she said, stopping short.

"What is positive, Madame Grandoni?"

"That you take the train in the morning."

"I can't tell you that, because it wouldn't be true. On the contrary, it has been settled that I shall stay over. I am very sorry if it distresses you — but che vuole?" Hyacinth added, smiling.

Madame Grandoni was a humorous woman, but she gave him no smile in return; she only looked at him a moment, and then, shrugging her shoulders silently but expressively, shuffled back to her room.

Chapter XXIV

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"I CAN GIVE you your friend's name — in a single guess. He is Diedrich Hoffendahl!" They had been strolling more and more slowly, the next morning, and as she made this announcement the Princess stopped altogether, standing there under a great beech, with her eyes upon Hyacinth's and her hands full of primroses. He had breakfasted, at noon, with his hostess and Madame Grandoni, but the old lady had fortunately not joined them when the Princess afterwards proposed that he should accompany her on her walk in the park. She told him that her venerable friend had let her know, while the day was still very young, that she thought it in the worst possible taste of the Princess not to have allowed Mr. Robinson to depart; to which Christina had replied that concerning tastes there was no disputing, and that they had disagreed on such matters before without any one being the worse. Hyacinth expressed the hope that they wouldn't dispute about him — of all thankless subjects in the world; and the Princess assured him that she never disputed about anything. She held that there were other ways than that of arranging one's relations with people; and Hyacinth guessed that she meant that when a difference became sharp she broke off altogether. On her side, then, there was as little possibility as on his that they should ever quarrel; their acquaintance would be a solid friendship, or it would be nothing at all. The Princess gave it from hour to hour more of this quality, and it may be imagined how safe Hyacinth felt by the time he began to tell her that something had happened to him, in London, three months before, one night (or rather in the small hours of the morning), that had altered his life altogether — had, indeed, as he might say, changed the terms on which he held it. He was aware that he didn't know exactly what he meant by this last phrase; but it expressed sufficiently well the new feeling that had come over him since that interminable, tantalizing cab-drive in the rain.

The Princess had led to this, almost as soon as they left the house; making up for her avoidance of such topics the day before by saying, suddenly, "Now tell me what is going on among your friends. I don't mean your worldly acquaintances, but your colleagues, your brothers. Ou en etes-vous, at the present time? Is there anything new, is anything going to be done? I am afraid you are always simply dawdling and muddling." Hyacinth felt as if, of late, he had by no means either dawdled or muddled; but before he had committed himself so far as to refute the imputation, the Princess exclaimed, in another tone, "How annoying it is that I can't ask you anything without giving you the right to say to yourself, 'After all, what do I know? May she not be in the pay of the police?"

"Oh, that doesn't occur to me," said Hyacinth, with a smile.

"It might, at all events; by which I mean it may, at any moment. Indeed, I think it ought."

"If you were in the pay of the police you wouldn't trouble your head about me."

"I should make you think that, certainly! That would be my first care. However, if you have no tiresome suspicions, so much the better," said the Princess; and she pressed him again for some news from behind the scenes.

In spite of his absence of doubt on the subject of her honesty — he felt that he should never again entertain any such trashy idea as that she might be an agent on the wrong side — he did not open himself immediately; but at the end of half an hour he let her know that the most important event of his life had taken place, scarcely more than the other day, in the most unexpected manner. And to explain in what it had consisted, he said, "I pledged myself, by everything that is sacred."

"To what did you pledge yourself?" "I took a vow — a tremendous, terrible vow — in the presence of four witnesses," Hyacinth went on.

"And what was it about, your vow?"

"I gave my life away," said Hyacinth, smiling.

She looked at him askance, as if to see how he would make such an announcement as that; but she wore no smile — her face was politely grave. They moved together a moment, exchanging a glance, in silence, and then she said, "Ah, well, then, I'm all the more glad you stayed!"

"That was one of the reasons."

"I wish you had waited — till after you had been here," the Princess remarked.

"Why till after I had been here?"

"Perhaps then you wouldn't have given away your life. You might have seen reasons for keeping it." And now, at last, she treated the matter gayly, as Hyacinth had done. He replied that he had not the least doubt that, on the whole, her influence was relaxing; but without heeding this remark she went on: "Be so good as to tell me what you are talking about."

"I'm not afraid of you, but I'll give you no names," said Hyacinth; and he related what had happened in the back room in Bloomsbury, in the course of that evening of which I have given some account. The Princess listened, intently, while they strolled under the budding trees with a more interrupted step. Never had the old oaks and beeches, renewing themselves in the sunshine as they did to-day, or naked in some gray November, witnessed such an extraordinary series of confidences, since the first pair that sought isolation wandered over the grassy slopes and ferny dells beneath them. Among other things Hyacinth mentioned to his companion that he didn't go to the place in Bloomsbury any more; he now perceived, what he ought' to have perceived long before, that this particular temple of their faith, and everything that pretended to get hatched there, was an idiotic sham. He had been a greenhorn, from the first, to take it seriously. He had done so mainly because a friend of his, in whom he had confidence, appeared to set him the example; but now it turned out that this friend (it was Paul Muniment again, by the way) had always thought the men who went there a pack of duffers, and was only trying them because he tried everything. There was nobody you could begin to call a firstrate man there, putting aside another friend of his, a Frenchman named Poupin (and Poupin was magnificent, but he wasn't firstrate). Hyacinth had a standard now that he had seen a man who was the very incarnation of his programme. You felt that he was a swell the very moment you came into his presence.

"Into whose presence,' Mr. Robinson?" the Princess inquired.

"I don't know that I ought to tell you, much as I believe in you! I am speaking of the very remarkable individual with whom I entered into that engagement."

"To give away your life?"

"To do something which in a certain contingency he will require of me. He will require my poor little carcass."

"Those plans have a way of failing — unfortunately," the Princess murmured, adding the last word more quickly.

"Is that a consolation, or a lament?" Hyacinth asked. "This one shall not fail, so far as it depends on me. They wanted an obliging young man — the place was vacant — I stepped in."

"I have no doubt you are right. We must pay for what we do." The Princess made that remark calmly and coldly; then she said, "I think I know the person in whose power you have placed yourself."

"Possibly, but I doubt it."

"You can't believe I have already gone so far? Why not? I have given you a certain amount of proof that I don't hang back."

"Well, if you know my friend, you have gone very far indeed."

The Princess appeared to be on the point of pronouncing a name; but she checked herself, and asked suddenly, smiling, "Don't they also want, by chance, an obliging young woman?"

"I happen to know he doesn't think much of women, my firstrate man. He doesn't trust them."

"Is that why you call him firstrate? You have very nearly betrayed him to me."

"Do you imagine there is only one of that opinion?" Hyacinth inquired.

"Only one who, having it, still remains a superior man. That's a very difficult opinion to reconcile with others that it is important to have."

"Schopenhauer did it, successfully," said Hyacinth.

"How delightful that you should know Schopenhauer!" the Princess exclaimed. "The gentleman I have in my eye is also German." Hyacinth let this pass, not challenging her, because he wished not to be challenged in return, and the Princess went on: "Of course, such an engagement as you speak of must make a tremendous difference, in everything."

"It has made this difference: that I have now a far other sense from any I had before of the reality, the solidity, of what is being prepared. I was hanging about outside, on the steps of the temple, among the loafers and the gossips, but now I have been in the innermost sanctuary — I have seen the holy of holies."

"And it's very dazzling?"

"Ah, Princess!" sighed the young man.

"Then it is real, it is solid?" she pursued. "That's exactly what I have been trying to find out, for so long."

"It is more strange than I can say. Nothing of it appears above the surface; but there is an immense underworld, peopled with a thousand forms of revolutionary passion and devotion. The manner in which it's organized is what astonished me; I knew that, or thought I knew it, in a general way, but the reality was a revelation. And on top of it all, society lives! People go and come, and buy and sell, and drink and dance, and make money and make love, and seem to know nothing and suspect nothing and think of nothing; and iniquities flourish, and the. misery of half the world is prated about as a 'necessary evil,' and generations rot away and starve, in the midst of it, and day follows day, and everything is for the best in the best of possible

worlds. All that is one half of it; the other half is that everything is doomed! In silence, in darkness, but under the feet of each one of us, the revolution lives and works. It is a wonderful, immeasurable trap, on the lid of which society performs its antics. When once the machinery is complete, there will be a great rehearsal. That rehearsal is what they want me for. The invisible, impalpable wires are everywhere, passing through everything, attaching themselves to objects in which one would never think of looking for them. What could be more strange and incredible, for instance, than that they should exist just here?"

"You make me believe it," said the Princess, thoughtfully.

"It matters little whether one believes it or not!"

"You have had a vision," the Princess continued.

"Parbleu,

I have had a vision! So would you, if you had been there."

"I wish I had!" she declared, in a tone charged with such ambiguous implications that Hyacinth, catching them a moment after she had spoken, rejoined, with a quick, incongruous laugh —

"No, you would have spoiled everything. He made me see, he made me feel, he made me do, everything he wanted."

"And why should he have wanted you, in particular?"

"Simply because I struck him as the right person. That's his affair: I can't tell you. When he meets the right person he chalks him. I sat on the bed. (There were only two chairs in the dirty little room, and by way of a curtain his overcoat was hung up before the window.) He didn't sit, himself; he leaned against the wall, straight in front of me, with his hands behind him. He told me certain things, and his manner was extraordinarily quiet. So was mine, I think I may say; and indeed it was only poor Poupin that made a row. It was for my sake, somehow: he didn't think we were all conscious enough; he wanted to call attention to my sublimity. There was no sublimity about it. I simply couldn't help myself. He and the other German had the two chairs, and Muniment sat on a queer old battered, hair-covered trunk, a most foreign-looking article." Hyacinth had taken no notice of the little ejaculation with which his companion greeted, in this last sentence, the word "other."

"And what did Mr. Muniment say?" she presently inquired.

"Oh, he said it was all right. Of course he thought that, from the moment he determined to bring me. He knew what the other fellow was looking for."

"I see." Then the Princess remarked, "We have a curious way of being fond of you."

"Whom do you mean by 'we '?"

"Your friends. Mr. Muniment and I, for instance."

"I like it as well as any other. But you don't feel alike. I have an idea you are sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"That I have put my head in a noose."

"Ah, you 're severe — I thought I concealed it so well!" the Princess exclaimed. He admitted that he had been severe, and begged her pardon, for he was by no means sure that there was not a hint of tears in her voice. She looked away from him for a minute, and it was after this that, stopping short, she remarked, as I have related, "He is Diedrich Hoffendahl."

Hyacinth stared for a moment, with parted lips. "Well, you are in it, more than I supposed!"

"You know he doesn't trust women," his companion smiled.

"Why in the world should you have cared for any light I can throw, if you have ever been in relation with him?"

She hesitated a little. "Oh, you are very different. I like you better," she added.

"Ah, if it's for that!" murmured Hyacinth.

The Princess colored, as he had seen her color before, and in "this accident, on her part, there was an unexpectedness, something touching. "Don't try to fix my inconsistencies on me," she said, with an humility which matched her blush. "Of course there are plenty of them, but it will always be kinder of you to let them pass. Besides, in this case they are not so serious as they seem. As a product of the 'people,' and of that strange, fermenting underworld (what you say of it is so true!), you interest me more, and have more to say to me, even than Hoffendahl — wonderful creature as he assuredly is."

"Would you object to telling me how and where you came to know him?"

"Through a couple of friends of mine in Vienna, two of the affiliated, both passionate revolutionists and clever men. They are Neapolitans, originally poveretti, like yourself, who emigrated, years ago, to seek their fortune. One of them is a teacher of -singing, the wisest, most accomplished person in his line I have ever known. The other, if you please, is a confectioner! He makes the most delicious patisserie fine. It would take long to tell you how I made their acquaintance, and how they put me into relation with the Maestro, as they called him, of whom they spoke with bated breath. It is not from yesterday — though you don't seem able to believe it — that I have had a care for all this business. I wrote to Hoffendahl, and had several letters from him; the singing-master and the pastrycook went bail for my sincerity. The next year I had an interview with him at Wiesbaden; but I can't tell you the circumstances of our meeting, in that place, without implicating another person, to whom, at present at least, I have no right to give you a clue. Of course Hoffendahl made an immense impression on me; he seemed to me the Master indeed, the very genius of a new social order, and I

fully understand the manner in which you were affected by him. When he was in London, three months ago, I knew it, and I knew where to write to him. I did so, and asked him if he wouldn't see me somewhere. I said I would meet him in any hole he should designate. He answered by a charming letter, which I will show you — there is nothing in the least compromising in it — but he declined my offer, pleading his short stay and a press of engagements. He will write to me, but he won't trust me. However,- he shall some day!"

Hyacinth was thrown quite off his balance by this representation of the ground the Princess had already traversed, and the explanation was still but half restorative when, on his asking her why she hadn't . exhibited her titles before, she replied, "Well, I thought my being quiet was the better way to draw you out." There was but little difficulty in drawing him out now, and before their walk was over he had told her more definitely what Hoffendahl demanded. This was simply that he should hold himself ready, for the next five years, to do, at a given moment, an act which would in all probability cost him his life. The act was as yet indefinite, but one might get an idea of it from the penalty involved, which would certainly be capital. The only thing settled was that it was to be done instantly and absolutely, without a question, a hesitation, or a scruple, in the manner that should be prescribed, at the moment, from headquarters. Very likely it would be to kill some one — some humbug in a high place; but whether the individual should deserve it or should not deserve it was not Hyacinth's affair. If he recognized generally Hoffendahl's wisdom — and the other night it had seemed to shine like a northern aurora — it was not in order that he might challenge it in the particular case. He had taken a vow of blind obedience, as the Jesuit fathers did to the head of their order. It was because they had carried out their vows (having, in the first place, great administrators) that their organization had been mighty, and that sort of mightiness was what people who felt as Hyacinth and the Princess felt should go in for. It was not certain that he should be taken, any more than it was certain that he should bring down his man; but it was much to be looked for, and it was what he counted on and indeed preferred. He should probably take little trouble to escape, and he should never enjoy the idea of hiding (after the fact) or running away. If it were a question of putting a bullet into some one, he himself should naturally deserve what would come to him. If one did that sort of thing, there was an indelicacy in not being ready to pay for it; and he, at least, was perfectly willing. He shouldn't judge; he should simply execute. He didn't pretend to say what good his little job might do, or what portee it might have; he hadn't the data for appreciating it, and simply took upon himself to believe that at headquarters they knew what they were about. The thing was to be a feature in a very large plan, of which he couldn't measure the scope — something that was to be done simultaneously in a dozen different countries. The effect was to be very much in this immense coincidence. It was to be hoped it wouldn't be spoiled. At any rate, he wouldn't hang fire, whatever the other fellows might do. He didn't say it because Hoffendahl had done him the honor of giving him the business to do, but he believed the Master knew how to pick out his men. To be sure, Hoffendahl had known nothing about him in advance; he had only been suggested to the man by those who were looking out from one day to the other. The fact remained, however, that when Hyacinth stood before him he recognized him as the sort of little chap that he had in his eye (one who could pass through a small orifice). Humanity, in his scheme, was classified and subdivided with a truly German thoroughness, and altogether, of course, from the point of view of the revolution, as it might forward or obstruct it. Hyacinth's little job was a very small part of what Hoffendahl had come to England for; he had in his hand innumerable other threads. Hyacinth knew nothing of these, and didn't much want to know, except that it was marvelous, the way Hoffendahl kept them apart. He had exactly the same mastery of them that a great musician — that the Princess herself — had of the keyboard of the piano; he treated all things, persons, institutions, ideas, as so many notes in his great symphonic revolt. The day would come when Hyacinth, far down in the treble, would feel himself touched by the little finger of the composer, would become audible (with a small, sharp crack) for a second.

It was impossible that our young man should not feel, at the end of ten minutes, that he had charmed the Princess into the deepest, most genuine attention; she was listening to him as she had never listened before. He enjoyed having that effect upon her, and his sense of the tenuity of the thread by which his future hung, renewed by his hearing himself talk about it, made him reflect that at present anything in the line of enjoyment was so much gained. The reader may judge whether he had passed through a phase of excitement after finding himself on his new footing of utility in the world; but that had finally spent itself, through a hundred forms of restlessness, of vain conjecture — through an exaltation which alternated with despair, and which, equally with the despair, he concealed more successfully than he supposed. He would have detested the idea that his companion might have heard his voice tremble while he told his story; but though today he had really grown used to his danger, and resigned, as it were, to his consecration, and though it could not fail to be agreeable to him to perceive that be was thrilling, he could still not guess how very remarkable, in such a connection, the Princess thought his composure, his lucidity and good-humor. It is true, she tried to hide her wonder, for she owed it to her self-respect to let it still appear that even she was prepared for a personal sacrifice as complete. She had the air — or she endeavored to have it — of accepting for him everything that he accepted for himself; nevertheless, there was something rather forced in the smile (lovely as it was) with which she covered him, while she said, after a little, "It's very serious — it's very serious indeed, isn't it?" He replied that the serious part was to come — there was no particular grimness for him (comparatively) in strolling in that sweet park and gossiping with her about the matter; and it occurred to her presently to suggest to him that perhaps Hoffendahl would never give him any sign at all, and he would wait all the while, sur les

dents, in a false suspense. He admitted that this would be a sell, but declared that either way he would be sold, though differently; and that, at any rate, he would have conformed to the great religious rule — to live each hour as if it were to be one's last.

"In holiness, you mean — in great recueillement?" the Princess asked.

"Oh dear, no; simply in extreme thankfulness for every minute that's added."

"Ah, well, there will probably be a great many," she rejoined.

"The more the better — if they are like this."

"That won't be the case with many of them, in Lomax Place."

"I assure you that since that night Lomax Place has improved." Hyacinth stood there, smiling, with his hands in his pockets and his hat pushed back a little.

The Princess appeared to consider this fact with an extreme intellectual curiosity. "If, after all, then, you are not called, you will have been positively happy."

"I shall have had some fine moments. Perhaps Hoffendahl's plot is simply for that; Muniment may have put him up to it!"

"Who knows? However, with me you must go 011 as if nothing were changed."

"Changed from what?"

"From the time of our first meeting at the theatre."

"I'll go on in any way you like," said Hyacinth; "only the real difference will be there."

"The real difference?"

"That I shall have ceased to care for what you care about."

"I don't understand," said the Princess.

"Isn't it enough, now, to give my life to the beastly cause," the young man broke out, "without giving my sympathy?"

"The beastly cause?" the Princess murmured, opening her deep eyes.

"Of course it is really just as holy as ever; only the people I find myself pitying now are the rich, the happy."

"I see. You are very curious. Perhaps you pity my husband," the Princess added in a moment.

"Do you call him one of the happy?" Hyacinth inquired, as they walked on again.

In answer to this she only repeated, "You are very curious."

I have related the whole of this conversation, because it supplies a highly important chapter of Hyacinth's history, but it will not be possible to trace all the stages through which the friendship of the Princess Casamassima with the young man she had constituted her bookbinder was confirmed. By the end of a week the standard of fitness she had set up in the place of exploded proprieties appeared the model of justice and convenience; and during this period many other things happened. One of them was that Hyacinth drove over to Broome with his hostess, and called on Lady Marchant and her daughters; an episode from which the Princess appeared to derive an exquisite gratification. When they came away he asked her why she hadn't told the ladies who he was. Otherwise, where was the point? And she replied, "Simply because they wouldn't have believed me. That's your fault!" This was the same note she had struck when, the third day of his stay (the weather had changed for the worse, and a rainy afternoon kept them indoors), she remarked to him, irrelevantly and abruptly, "It is most extraordinary, your knowing about Schopenhauer!" He answered that she really seemed quite unable to accustom herself to his little talents; and this led to a long talk, longer than the one I have already narrated, in which he took her still further into his confidence. Never had the pleasure of conversation (the greatest he knew) been so largely opened to him. The Princess admitted, frankly, that he would, to her sense, take a great deal of accounting for; she observed that he was, no doubt, pretty well used to himself, but he must give other people time. "I have watched you, constantly, since you have been here, in every detail of your behavior, and I am more and more in-trigee. You haven't a vulgar intonation, you haven't a common gesture, you never make a mistake, you do and say everything exactly in the right way. You come out of the hole you have described to me, and yet you might have stayed in country-houses all your life. You are much better than if you had! Jugez done, from the way I talk to you! I have to make no allowances. I have seen Italians with that sort of natural tact and taste, but I didn't know one ever found it in any Anglo-Saxon in whom it hadn't been cultivated at a vast expense; unless, indeed, in certain little American women."

"Do you mean I'm a gentleman?" asked Hyacinth, in a peculiar tone, looking out into the wet garden.

She hesitated, and then she said, "It's I who make the mistake!" Five minutes later she broke into an exclamation which touched him almost more than anything she had ever done, giving him the highest opinion of her delicacy and sympathy, and putting him 'before himself as vividly as if the words were a little portrait: "Fancy the strange, the bitter fate: to be constituted as you are constituted, to feel the capacity that you must feel, and yet to look at the good things of life only through the glass of the pastrycook's window!"

"Every class has its pleasures," Hyacinth rejoined, with perverse sententiousness, in spite of his emotion; but the remark didn't darken their mutual intelligence, and before they separated that evening he told her the things that had never yet passed his lips — the things to which he had awaked when he made Pinnie explain to him the visit to the prison. He told her, in a-word, what he was.

Chapter XXV

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HYACINTH took several long walks by himself, beyond the gates of the park and through the neighboring country — walks during which, committed as he was to reflection on the general “rum-ness” of his destiny, he had still a delighted attention to spare for the green dimness of leafy lanes; the attraction of meadow-paths that led from stile to stile, and seemed a clue to some pastoral happiness, some secret of the fields; the hedges thick with flowers, bewilderingly common, for which he knew no names; the picture-making quality of thatched cottages; the mystery and sweetness of blue distances; the bloom of rural complexions; the sweetness of little girls bobbing curtsies by waysides (a sort of homage he had never prefigured); the soft sense of the turf under feet that had never ached but from paving-stones. One morning, as he had his face turned homeward, after a long stroll, he heard behind him the sound of a horse’s hoofs, and, looking back, perceived a gentleman, who would presently pass him, advancing up the road which led to the lodge gates of Medley. He went his way, and, as the horse overtook him, he noticed that the rider slackened pace. Then he turned again, and recognized in this personage his brilliant, occasional friend Captain Sholto. The captain pulled up alongside of him, saluting him with a smile and a movement of the whip handle. Hyacinth stared with surprise, not having heard from the Princess that she was expecting him. He gathered, however, in a moment, that she was not; and meanwhile he received an impression, on Sholto’s part, of riding-gear that was “knowing” — of gaiters and spurs and a curious waistcoat; perceiving that this was a phase of the captain’s varied nature which he had not yet had an opportunity to observe. He struck him as very high in the air, perched on his big, lean chestnut, and Hyacinth noticed that if the horse was heated the rider was cool.

“Good-morning, my dear fellow. I thought I should find you here!” the captain exclaimed. “It’s a good job I’ve met you this way, without having to go to the house.”

“Who gave you reason to think I was here?” Hyacinth asked; partly occupied with the appositeness of this inquiry, and partly thinking, as his eyes wandered over his handsome friend, bestriding so handsome a beast, what a jolly thing it would be to know how to ride. He had already, during the few days he had been at Medley, had time to observe that the knowledge of luxury and the extension of one’s sensations beget a taste for still newer pleasures.

“Why, I knew the Princess was capable of asking you,” Sholto said; “and I learned at the Sun and Moon that you had not been there for a long time. I knew, furthermore, that as a general thing you go there a good deal, don’t you? So I put this and that together, and judged you were out of town.”

This was very luminous and straightforward, and might have satisfied Hyacinth, were it not for that irritating reference to the Princess being “capable of asking him.” He knew as well as the captain that it had been tremendously eccentric in her to do so, but somehow a transformation had lately taken place in him which made it disagreeable for him to receive that view from another, and particularly from a gentleman of whom, on a certain occasion, several mouths before, he had had strong grounds for thinking unfavorably. He had not seen Sholto since the evening when a queer combination of circumstances caused him, more queerly still, to sit and listen to comic songs in the company of Millicent Henning and this admirer. The captain did not conceal his admiration; Hyacinth had his own ideas about his taking that line in order to look more innocent. That evening, when he accompanied Millicent to her lodgings (they parted with Sholto on coming out of the Pavilion), the situation was tense between the young lady and her childhood’s friend. She let him have it, as she said; she gave him a dressing, which she evidently intended should be memorable, for having suspected her, for having insulted her before a military gentleman. The tone she took, and the magnificent audacity with which she took it, reduced him to a kind of gratified helplessness; he watched her, at last, with something of the excitement with which he would have watched a clever but uncultivated actress, while she worked herself into a passion which he believed to be fictitious. He gave more credence to his jealousy and to the whole air of the case than to her vehement repudiations, enlivened though these were by tremendous head-tossings and skirt-shakings. But he felt baffled and outfaced, and took refuge in sarcasms which, after all, proved as little as her high gibes; seeking a final solution in one of those beastly little French shrugs, as Millicent called them, with which she had already reproached him with interlarding his conversation.

The air was never cleared, though the subject of their dispute was afterwards dropped, Hyacinth promising himself to watch his playmate as he had never done before. She let him know, as may well be supposed, that she had her eye on him, and it must be confessed that, as regards the exercise of a right of supervision, he had felt himself at a disadvantage ever since the night at the theatre. It mattered little that she had pushed him into the Princess’s box (for she herself had not been jealous beforehand; she had wanted too much to know what such a person could be “up to,” desiring, perhaps, to borrow a hint), and it mattered little, also, that his relations with the great lady were all for the sake of suffering humanity; the atmosphere, none the less, was full of thunder for many weeks, and it scarcely signified from which quarter the flash and the explosion proceeded. Hyacinth was a good deal surprised to find that he should care whether Millicent deceived him or not, and even tried to persuade himself that he didn’t; but there was a grain of conviction in his heart that some kind of personal affinity existed between them, and that it would torment him more never to see her at all than to see her go into tantrums in order to cover her tracks. An inner sense told him that her mingled

beauty and grossness, her vulgar vitality, the spirit of contradiction yet at the same time of attachment, that was in her, had ended by making her indispensable to him. She bored him as much as she irritated him; but if she was full of execrable taste, she was also full of life, and her rustlings and chatterings, her wonderful stories, her bad grammar and good health, her insatiable thirst, her shrewd perceptions and grotesque opinions, her mistakes and her felicities, were now all part of the familiar human sound of his little world. He could say to himself that she came after him much more than he went after her, and this helped him, a little, to believe, though the logic was but lame, that she was not making a fool of him. If she were really taking up with a swell, he didn't see why she wished to retain a bookbinder. Of late, it must be added, he had ceased to devote much consideration to Millicent's ambiguities; for although he was lingering on at Medley for the sake of suffering humanity, he was quite aware that to say so (if she should ask him for a reason) would have almost as absurd a sound as some of the girl's own speeches. As regards Sholto, he was in the awkward position of having let him off, as it were, by accepting his hospitality, his bounty; so that he couldn't quarrel with him except on a fresh pretext. This pretext the captain had apparently been careful not to give, and Millicent had told him, after the triple encounter in the street, that he had driven him out of England, the poor gentleman, whom he insulted by his low insinuations even more (why "even more" Hyacinth hardly could think) than he outraged herself. When he asked her what she knew about the captain's movements, she made no scruple to announce to him that the latter had come to her great shop to make a little purchase (it was a pair of silk braces, if she remembered rightly, and she admitted, perfectly, the transparency of the pretext), and had asked her with much concern whether his gifted young friend (that's what he called him — Hyacinth could see he meant well) was still in a huff. Millicent had answered that she was afraid he was — the more shame to him; and then the captain had said that it didn't matter, for he himself was on the point of leaving England for several weeks (Hyacinth — he called him Hyacinth this time — couldn't have ideas about a man in a foreign country, could he?), and he hoped that by the time he returned the little cloud would have blown over. Sholto had added that she had better tell him frankly — recommending her at the same time to be gentle with their morbid friend — about his visit to the shop. Their candor, their humane precautions, were all very well; but after this, two or three evenings, Hyacinth passed and repassed the captain's chambers in Queen Anne Street, to see if, at the window, there were signs of his being in London. Darkness, however, prevailed, and he was forced to comfort himself a little, when at last making up his mind to ring at the door and inquire, by way of a test, for the occupant, he was informed, by the superior valet whose acquaintance he had already made, and whose air of wearing a jacket left behind by his master confirmed the statement, that the gentleman in question was at Monte Carlo.

"Have you still got your back up a little?" the captain demanded, without rancor; and in a moment he had swung a long leg over the saddle and dismounted, walking beside his young friend and leading his horse by the bridle. Hyacinth pretended not to know what he meant, for it came over him that after all, even if he had not condoned, at the time, the captain's suspected treachery, he was in no position, sitting at the feet of the Princess, to sound the note of jealousy in relation to another woman. He reflected that the Princess had originally been, in a manner, Sholto's property, and if he did, en Jin de compte, wish to quarrel with him about Millicent, he would have to cease to appear to poach on the captain's preserves. It now occurred to him, for the first time, that the latter had intended a kind of exchange; though it must be added that the Princess, who on a couple of occasions had alluded slightingly to her military friend, had given him no sign of recognizing this gentleman's claim. Sholto let him know, at present, that he was staying at Bonchester, seven miles off; he had come down from London and put up at the inn. That morning he had ridden over on a hired horse (Hyacinth had supposed this steed was a very fine animal, but Sholto spoke of it as a beastly screw); he had been taken by the sudden fancy of seeing how his young friend was coming on.

"I'm coming on very well, thank you," said Hyacinth, with some shortness, not knowing exactly what business it was of the captain's.

"Of course you understand my interest in you, don't you? I'm responsible for you — I put you forward."

"There are a great many things in the world that I don't understand, but I think the thing I understand least is your interest in me. Why the devil" — And Hyacinth paused, breathless with the force of his inquiry. Then he went on, "If I were you, I shouldn't care a filbert for the sort of person that I happen to be."

"That proves how different my nature is from yours! But I don't believe it, my boy; you are too generous for that." Sholto's imperturbability always appeared to grow with the irritation it produced, and it was proof even against the just resentment excited by his want of tact. That want of tact was sufficiently marked when he went on to say, "I wanted to see you here, with my own eyes. I wanted to see how it looked; it is a rum sight! Of course you know what I mean, though you are always trying to make a fellow explain. I don't explain well, in any sense, and that's why I go in only for clever people, who can do without it. It's very grand, her having brought you down."

"Grand, no doubt, but hardly surprising, considering that, as you say, I was put forward by you."

" Oh, that's a great thing for me, but it doesn't make any difference to her!" Sholto exclaimed. "She may care for certain things for themselves, but it will never signify a jot to her what I may have thought about them. One good turn deserves another. I wish you would put me forward!"

"I don't understand you, and I don't think I want to," said Hyacinth, as his companion strolled beside him.

The latter put a hand on his arm, stopping him, and they stood face to face a moment. "I say, my dear

Robinson, you ‘re not spoiled already, at the end of a week — how long is it? It isn’t possible you ‘re jealous!”

“Jealous of whom?” asked Hyacinth, whose failure to comprehend was perfectly genuine.

Sholto looked at him a moment; then, with a laugh, “I don’t mean Miss Henning.” Hyacinth turned away, and the captain resumed his walk, now taking the young man’s arm and passing his own through the bridle of the horse. “The courage of it, the insolence, the codnerie! There isn’t another woman in Europe who could carry it off.”

Hyacinth was silent a little; after which he remarked, “This is nothing, here. You should have seen me the other day over at Broome, at Lady Merchant’s.”

“Gad, did she take you there? I ‘d have given ten pounds to see it. There’s no one like her!” cried the captain, gayly, enthusiastically.

“There’s no one like me, I think — for going.”

“Why, didn’t you enjoy it?”

“Too much — too much. Such excesses are dangerous.”

“Oh, I’ll back you,” said the captain; then, checking their pace, he inquired, “Is there any chance of our meeting her? I won’t go into the park.”

“You won’t go to the house?” Hyacinth demanded, staring.

“Oh dear, no, not while you ‘re there.”

“Well, I shall ask the Princess about you, and have done with it, once for all.”

“Lucky little beggar, with your fireside talks!” the captain exclaimed. “Where does she sit now, in the evening? She won’t tell you anything except that I’m a nuisance; but even if she were willing to take the trouble to throw some light upon me, it wouldn’t be of much use, because she doesn’t understand me, herself.”

“You are the only thing in the world, then, of which that can be said,” Hyacinth returned.

“I dare say I am, and I am rather proud of it. So far as the head is concerned, the Princess is all there. I told you, when I presented you, that she was the cleverest woman in Europe, and that is still my opinion. But there are some mysteries you can’t see into unless you happen to have a little heart. The Princess hasn’t, though doubtless just now you think that’s her strong point. One of these days you’ll see. I don’t care a straw, myself, whether she has or not. She has hurt me already so much she can’t hurt me Any more, and my interest in her is quite independent of that. To watch her, to adore her, to see her lead her life and act out her extraordinary nature, all the while she treats me like a brute, is the only thing I care for to-day. It doesn’t do me a scrap of good, but, all the same, it’s my principal occupation. You may believe me or not — it doesn’t in the least matter; but I’m the most disinterested human being alive. She’ll tell you I’m a tremendous ass, and so one is. But that isn’t all.”

It was Hyacinth who stopped this time, arrested by something new and natural in the tone of his companion, a simplicity of emotion which he had not hitherto associated with him. He stood there a moment looking up at him, and thinking again what improbable confidences it decidedly appeared to be his lot to receive from gentlefolks. To what quality in himself were they a tribute? The honor was one he could easily dispense with; though as he scrutinized Sholto he found something in his curious light eyes — an expression of cheerfulness not disconnected from veracity — which put him into a more natural relation with this jaunty, factitious personage. “Please go on,” he said, in a moment.

“Well, what I mentioned just now is my real and only motive, in anything. The rest is mere gammon and rubbish, to cover it up — or to give myself the change, as the French say.”

“What do you mean by the rest?” asked Hyacinth, thinking of Millicent Henning.

“Oh, all the straw one chews, to cheat one’s appetite; all the rot one dabbles in, because it may lead to something which it never does lead to; all the beastly buncombe (you know) that you and I have heard together in Bloomsbury, and that I myself have poured out, damme, with an eloquence worthy of a better cause. Don’t you remember what I have said to you — all as my own opinion — about the impending change of the relations of class with class? Impending fiddlesticks! I believe those that are on top the heap are better than those that are under it, that they mean to stay there, and that if they are not a pack of poltroons they will.”

“You don’t care for the social question, then?” Hyacinth inquired, with an aspect of which he was conscious of the blankness.

“I only took it up because she did. It hasn’t helped me,” Sholto remarked, smiling. “My dear Robinson,” he went on, “there is only one thing I care for in life: to have a look at that woman when I can; and when I can’t, to approach her in the sort of way I’m doing now.”

“ It’s a very curious sort of way.”

“Indeed it is; but if it is good enough for me it ought to be good enough for you. What I want you to do is this — to induce her to ask me over to dine.”

“To induce her” — Hyacinth murmured.

“Tell her I’m staying at Bonchester, and it would be an act of common humanity.”

They proceeded till they reached the gates, and in a moment Hyacinth said, “You took up the social question, then, because she did; but do you happen to know why she took it up?”

“Ah, my dear fellow, you must find that out for yourself. I found you the place, but I can’t do your work for you.”

“I see — I see. But perhaps you’ll tell me this: if you had free access to the Princess a year ago, taking her to

the theatre and that sort of thing, why shouldn't you have it now?"

This time Sholto's white pupils looked strange again. "'You have it now, my dear fellow, but I'm afraid it doesn't follow that you'll have it a year hence. She was tired of me then, and of course she's still more tired of me now, for the simple reason that I'm more tiresome. She has sent me to Coventry, and I want to come out for a few hours. See how conscientious I am — I won't pass the gates."

"I'll tell her I met you," said Hyacinth. Then, irrelevantly, he added, "Is that what you mean by her having no heart?"

"Her treating me as she treats me? Oh, dear, no; her treating you!"

This had a portentous sound, but it did not prevent Hyacinth from turning round with his visitor (for it was the greatest part of the oddity of the present meeting that the hope of a little conversation with him, if accident were favorable, had been the motive not only of Sholto's riding over to Medley, but of his coming down to stay, in the neighborhood, at a musty inn, in a dull market-town) — it .did not prevent him, I say, from bearing the captain company for a mile on his backward way. Our young man did not pursue this particular topic much further, but he discovered still another reason or two for admiring the light, free action with which his companion had unmasked himself, and the nature of his interest in the revolutionary idea, after he had asked him, abruptly, what he had had in his head when he traveled over that evening, the summer before (he didn't appear to have come back as often as he promised), to Paul Muniment's place in South Lambeth. What was he looking for, whom was he looking for, there?

"I was looking for anything that would turn up, that might take her fancy. Don't you understand that I'm always looking? There was a time when I went in immensely for illuminated minds, and another when I collected horrible ghost stories (she wanted to cultivate a belief in ghosts), all for her. The day I saw she was turning her attention to the rising democracy, I began to collect little democrats. That's how I collected you."

"Muniment read you exactly, then. And what did you find to your purpose in Audley Court?"

"Well, I think the little woman with the popping eyes — she reminded me of a bedridden grasshopper — will do. And I made a note of the other one, the old maid with the high nose, the aristocratic sister of mercy. I'm keeping them in reserve for my next propitiatory offering."

Hyacinth was silent a moment. "And Muniment himself — can't you do anything with him?"

"Oh, my dear fellow, after you he's poor!"

"That's the first stupid thing you have said. But it doesn't matter, for he dislikes the Princess — what he knows of her — too much ever to consent to see her."

"That's his line, is it? Then he'll do!" Sholto cried.

Chapter XXVI

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“OF COURSE HE MAY come, and stay as long as he likes!” the Princess exclaimed, when Hyacinth, that afternoon, told her of his encounter, with the sweet, bright surprise her face always wore when people went through the form (supererogatory she apparently meant to declare it) of asking her leave. From the manner in which she granted Sholto’s petition — with a geniality that made light of it, as if the question were not worth talking of, one way or the other — it might have been supposed that the account he had given Hyacinth of their relations was an elaborate, but none the less foolish hoax. She sent a messenger with a note over to Bonchester, and the captain arrived just in time to dress for dinner. The Princess was always late, and Hyacinth’s toilet, on these occasions, occupied him considerably (he was acutely conscious of its deficiencies, and yet tried to persuade himself that they were positively honorable, and that the only garb of dignity, for him, was the costume, as it were, of his profession); therefore, when the fourth member of the little party descended to the drawingroom, Madame Grandoni was the only person he found there.

“Lieber Gott!

I’m glad to see you! What good wind has sent you?” she exclaimed, as soon as Sholto came into the room.

“Didn’t you know I was coming?” he asked. “Has the idea of my arrival produced so little agitation?”

“I know nothing of the affairs of this house. I have given them up at last, and it was time. I remain in my room.” There was nothing at present in the old lady’s countenance of her usual spirit of cheer; it expressed anxiety, and even a certain sternness, and the excellent woman had, perhaps, at this moment more than she had ever had in her life of the air of a duenna who took her duties seriously. She looked almost august. “From the moment you come it’s a little better. But it is very bad.”

“Very bad, dear madam?”

“Perhaps you will be able to tell me where Christina veut en venir. I have always been faithful to her — I have always been loyal. But to-day I have lost patience. It has no sense.”

“I am not sure I know what you are talking about,” Sholto said; “but if I understand you, I must tell you I think it’s magnificent.”

“Yes, I know your tone; you are worse than she, because you are cynical. It passes all bounds. It is very serious. I have been thinking what I should do.”

“Precisely; I know what you would do.”

“Oh, this time I shouldn’t come back!” the old lady declared. “The scandal is too great; it is intolerable. My only fear is to make it worse.”

“Dear Madame Grandoni, you can’t make it worse, and you can’t make it better,” Sholto rejoined, seating himself on the sofa beside her. “In point of fact, no idea of scandal can possibly attach itself to our friend. She is above and outside of all. such considerations, such dangers. She carries everything off; she heeds so little, she cares so little. Besides, she has one great strength — she does no wrong.”

“Pray, what do you call it when a lady sends for a bookbinder-to come and stay with her?”

“Why not for a bookbinder as well as for a bishop? It all depends upon who the lady is, and what she is.”

“She had better take care of one thing first,” cried Madame Grandoni— “that she shall not have been separated from her husband!”

“The Princess can carry off even that. It’s unusual, it’s eccentric, it’s fantastic, if you will, but it isn’t necessarily wicked. From her own point of view, our friend goes straight. Besides, she has her opinions.”

“Her opinions are perversity itself.”

“What does it matter,” asked Sholto, “if they keep her quiet?”

“Quiet! Do you call this quiet?”

“Surely, if you’ll only be so yourself. Putting the case at the worst, moreover, who is to know he’s her bookbinder? It’s the last thing you ‘d take him for.”

“Yes, for that she chose him carefully,” the old lady murmured, still with a discontented eyebrow.

“She chose him? It was I who chose him, dear lady!” the captain exclaimed, with a laugh which showed how little he shared her solicitude.

“Yes, I had forgotten; at the theatre,” said Madame Grandoni, gazing at him as if her ideas were confused, but a certain repulsion from her interlocutor nevertheless disengaged itself. “It was a fine turn you did him there, poor young man!”

“Certainly, he will have to be sacrificed. But why was I bound to consider him so much? Haven’t I been sacrificed myself?”

“Oh, if he bears it like you!” cried the old lady, with a short laugh.

“How do you know how I bear it? One does what one can,” said the captain, settling his shirtfront. “At any rate, remember this: she won’t tell people who he is, for his own sake; and he won’t tell them, for hers. So, as he looks much more like a poet, or a pianist, or a painter, there won’t be that sensation you fear.”

“Even so it’s bad enough,” said Madame Grandoni. “And he’s capable of bringing it out, suddenly, himself.”

“Ah, if he doesn’t mind it, she won’t. But that’s “his affair.”

“It’s too terrible, to spoil him for his station,” the old lady went on. can he ever go back?”

“If you want him kept, then, indefinitely, you are inconsistent. Besides, if he pays for it, he deserves to pay. He’s an abominable little conspirator against society.”

Madame Grandoni was silent a moment; then she looked at the captain with a gravity which might have been impressive to him, had not his accomplished jauntiness suggested an insensibility to that sort of influence. “What, then, does Christina deserve?” she asked, with solemnity.

“Whatever she may get; whatever, in the future, may make her suffer. But it won’t be the loss of her reputation. She is too distinguished.”

“You English are strange. Is it because she’s a princess?” Madame Grandoni reflected, audibly.

“Oh, dear, no, her princedom is nothing here. We can easily beat that. But we can’t beat” — And Sholto paused a moment.

“What then?” his companion asked.

“Well, that originality, which seems perfectly natural, without any pose; the sort of thing by which she has bedeviled me.”

“Oh, you!” murmured Madame Grandoni.

“If you think so poorly of me, why did you say just now that you were glad to see me?” Sholto demanded, in a moment.

“Because you make another person in the house, and that is more regular; the situation is by so much less — what did you call it? — eccentric. Nun” the old lady went on, in a moment, “so long as you are here I won’t go off.”

“Depend upon it that I shall be here until I’m turned out.”

She rested her small, troubled eyes upon him, but they betrayed no particular enthusiasm at this announcement, “I don’t understand how, for yourself, on such an occasion, you should like it.”

“Dear Madame Grandoni, the heart of man, without being such a hopeless labyrinth as the heart of woman, is still sufficiently complicated. Don’t I know what will become of the little beggar?”

“You are very horrible,” said the ancient woman. Then she added, in a different tone, “He is much too good for his fate.”

“And pray wasn’t I, for mine?” the captain asked.

“By no manner of means!” Madame Grandoni answered, rising and moving away from him.

The Princess had come into the room, accompanied by Hyacinth. As it was now considerably past the dinner-hour, the old lady judged that this couple, on their side, had met in the hall and had prolonged their conversation there. Hyacinth watched with extreme interest the way the Princess greeted the captain — observed that it was very simple, easy, and friendly. At dinner she made no stranger of him, including him in everything, as if he had been a useful familiar, like Madame Grandoni, only a little less venerable, yet not giving him any attention that might cause their eyes to meet. She had told Hyacinth that she didn’t like his eyes, nor indeed, very much, any part of him. Of course any admiration, from almost any source, could not fail to be in some degree agreeable to a woman, but of any little impression that one might ever have produced the mark she had made on Godfrey Sholto was the one that ministered least to her vanity. He had been useful, undoubtedly, at times, but at others he had been an intolerable bore. He was so uninteresting in himself, so shallow, so unoccupied and factitious, and really so frivolous, in spite of his pretension (of which she was unspeakably weary) of being all wrapped up in a single idea. It had never, by itself, been sufficient to interest her in any man, the fact that he was in love with her; but indeed she could honestly say that most of the people who had liked her had had, on their own side, something — something in their character or circumstances — that one could care a little about. Not so far as would do any harm, save perhaps in one or two cases; but still, something.

Sholto was a curious and not particularly edifying English type (as the Princess further described him); one of those strange beings produced by old societies that have run to seed, corrupt, exhausted civilizations. He was a cumberer of the earth, and purely selfish, in spite of his devoted, disinterested airs. He was nothing whatever in himself, and had no character or merit save by tradition, reflection, imitation, superstition. He had a loutish pedigree — he came of some musty, mouldy “county-family,” people with a local reputation and an immense lack of general importance; he had taken the greatest care of his little fortune. He had traveled all over the globe several times, “for the shooting,” in that grotesque way of the English. That was a pursuit which was compatible with the greatest stupidity. He had a little taste, a little cleverness,’ a little reading, a little good furniture, a little French and Italian (he exaggerated these latter quantities), an immense deal of assurance, and complete leisure. That, at bottom, was all he represented — idle, trifling, luxurious, yet at the same time pretentious leisure, the sort of thing that led people to invent false, humbugging duties, because they had no real ones. Sholto’s great idea of himself (after his profession of being her slave) was that he was a-cosmopolite, and exempt from every prejudice. About the prejudices the Princess couldn’t say and didn’t care; but she had seen him in foreign countries, she had seen him in Italy, and she was bound to say he understood nothing about those people. It was several years before, shortly after her marriage, that she had first encountered him. He had not begun immediately to take the adoring line; but it had come little by little. It was only after she had separated from her husband that he had begun really to hang about her; since when she had

suffered much from him. She would do him one justice, however: he had never, so far as she knew, had the impudence to represent himself as anything but hopeless and helpless. It was on this that he took his stand; he wished to pass for the great model of unrewarded constancy. She couldn't imagine what he was waiting for; perhaps it was for the death of the Prince. But the Prince would never die, nor had she the least desire that he should. She had no wish to be harsh, for of course that sort of thing, from any one, was very flattering; but really, whatever feeling poor Sholto might have, four fifths of it were purely theatrical. He was not in the least a natural human being, but had a hundred affectations and attitudes, the result of never having been obliged to put his hand to anything; having no serious tastes, and yet being born to a little "position." The Princess remarked that she was so glad Hyacinth had no position, and had been forced to do something in life but amuse himself; that was the way she liked her friends now. She had said to Sholto again and again, "There are plenty of others who will be much more pleased; why not go to them? It's such a waste of time:" and she was sure he had taken her advice, and was by no means, as regards herself, the absorbed, annihilated creature he endeavored to appear. He had told her once that he tried to take an interest in other women — though indeed he had added that it was of no use. Of what use did he expect anything he could possibly do to be? Hyacinth did not tell the Princess that he had reason to believe the captain's effort in this direction had not been absolutely vain; but he made that reflection, privately, with increased confidence. He recognized a further truth even when his companion said, at the end, that, with all she had touched upon, he was a queer combination. Trifler as he was, there was something sinister in him, too; and she confessed she had had a vague feeling, at times, that some day he might do her a hurt. Hyacinth, at this, stopped short, on the threshold of the drawingroom, and asked in a low voice, "Are you afraid of him?"

The Princess looked at him a moment; then smiling, "Dio mio, how you say that! Should you like to kill him for me?"

"I shall have to kill some one, you know. Why not him, while I'm about it, if he troubles you?"

"Ah, my friend, if you should begin to kill every one who had troubled me!" the Princess murmured, as they went into the room.

Chapter XXVII

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HYACINTH KNEW THERE was something out of the way, as soon as he saw Lady Aurora's face look forth at him, in answer to his tap, while she held the door ajar. What was she doing in Pinnie's bedroom? — a very poor place, into which the dressmaker, with her reverence, would never have admitted a person of that quality, unless things were pretty bad. She was solemn, too; she didn't laugh, as "usual; she had removed her large hat, with its limp, old-fashioned veil, and she raised her finger to her lips. Hyacinth's first alarm had been immediately after he let himself into the house, with his latchkey, as he always did, and found the little room on the right of the passage, in which Pinnie had lived ever since he remembered, fireless and untenanted. As soon as he had paid the cabman, who put down his portmanteau for him in the hall (he was not used to paying cabmen, and was conscious he gave him too much, but was too impatient, in his sudden anxiety, to care), he hurried up the vile staircase, which seemed viler, even through his preoccupation, than ever, and gave the knock, accompanied by a call the least bit tremulous, immediately answered by Lady Aurora. She drew back into the room a moment, while he stared, in his dismay; then she emerged again, closing the door behind her — all with the air of enjoining him to be terribly quiet. He felt, suddenly, so sick at the idea of having lingered at Medley, while there was distress at the wretched little house to which he owed so much, that he scarcely found strength for an articulate question, and obeyed, mechanically, the mute, urgent gesture by which Lady Aurora appealed to him to go downstairs with her. It was only when they stood together in the deserted parlor (it was as if he perceived for the first time what an inelegant odor prevailed there) that he asked, "Is she dying — is she dead?" That was the least the strained sadness looking out from the face of the noble visitor appeared to announce.

"Dear Mr. Robinson, I'm so sorry for you. I wanted to write, but I promised her I wouldn't. She is very ill — we are very anxious. It began ten days ago, and I suppose I must tell you how much she has gone down." Lady Aurora spoke with more than all her usual embarrassments and precautions, eagerly, yet as if it cost her much pain: pausing a little after everything she said, to see how he would take it; then going on. with a little propitiatory rush. He learned presently what was the matter, what doctor she had sent for, and that if he would wait a little before going into the room it would be so much better; the invalid having sunk, within half an hour, into a doze of a less agitated kind than she had had for some time, from which it would be an immense pity to run the risk of waking her. The doctor gave her the right things, as it seemed to her ladyship, but he admitted that she had very little power of resistance. He was of course not a very large practitioner, Mr. Buffery, from round the corner, but he seemed really clever; and she herself had taken the liberty (as she confessed to this she threw off one of her odd laughs, and her color rose) of sending an elderly, respectable person — a kind of nurse. She was out just then; she had to go, for an hour, for the air— "only when I come, of course," said Lady Aurora. Dear Miss Pynsent had had a cold hanging about her, and had not taken care of it.

Hyacinth would know how plucky she was about that sort of thing; she took so little interest in herself. “Of course a cold is a cold, whoever has it; isn’t it?” said Lady Aurora. Ten days before, she had taken an additional chill through falling asleep in her chair, in the evening, down there, and letting the fire go out. “It would have been nothing if she had been like you or me, you know,” her ladyship went on; “but just as she was then, it made the difference. The day was horribly damp, and it had struck into the lungs, and inflammation had set in. Mr. Buffery says she was impoverished, just rather low and languid, you know.” The next morning she had bad pains and a good deal of fever, yet she had got up. Poor Pinnie’s gracious ministrant did not make clear to Hyacinth what time had elapsed before she came to her relief, nor by what means she had been notified, and he saw that she slurred this over from the admirable motive of wishing him not to feel that the little dressmaker had suffered by his absence or called for him in vain. This, apparently, had indeed not been the case, if Pinnie had opposed, successfully, his being written to. Lady Aurora only said, “I came in very soon, it was such a delightful chance. Since then she has had everything; only it’s sad to see a person need so little. She did want you to stay; she has clung to that idea. I speak the simple truth, Mr. Robinson,” the excellent spinster went on.

“I don’t know what to say to you — you are so extraordinarily good, so angelic,” Hyacinth replied, bewildered and made weak by a strange, unexpected shame. The episode he had just traversed, the splendor he had been living in and drinking so deep of, the unnatural alliance to which he had given himself up, while his wretched little foster-mother struggled alone with her death stroke (he could see it was that; the presentiment of it, the last stiff horror, was in all the place) — the contrast seemed to cut him like a knife, and to make the horrible accident of his absence a perversity of his own. “I can never blame you, when you are so kind, but I wish to God I had known!” he broke out.

Lady Aurora clasped her hands, begging him to judge her fairly. “Of course it was a great responsibility for us, but we thought it right to consider what she urged upon us. She went back to it constantly, that your visit should not be cut short. When you should come of yourself, it would be time enough. I don’t know exactly where you have been, but she said it was such a pleasant house. She kept repeating that it would do you so much good.”

Hyacinth felt his eyes filling with tears. “She’s dying — she’s dying! How can she live when she’s like that?”

He sank upon the old yellow sofa, the sofa of his lifetime and of so many years before, and buried his head on the shabby, tattered arm. A succession of sobs broke from his lips — sobs in which the accumulated emotion of months and the strange, acute conflict of feelings that had possessed him for the three weeks just past found relief and a kind of solution. Lady Aurora sat down beside him, and laid her fingertips gently on his hand. So, for a minute, while his tears flowed and she said nothing, he felt her timid, consoling touch. At the end of the minute he raised his head; it came back to him that she had said “we” just before, and he asked her whom she meant.

“Oh, Mr. Vetch, don’t you know? I have made his acquaintance; it’s impossible to be more kind.” Then, while, for an instant, Hyacinth was silent, wincing, pricked with the thought that Pinnie had been beholden to the fiddler while he was masquerading in high life, Lady Aurora added, “He’s a charming musician. She asked him once, at first, to bring his violin; she thought it would soothe her.”

“I’m much obliged to him, but now that I’m here we needn’t trouble him,” said Hyacinth.

Apparently there was a certain dryness in his tone, which was the cause of her ladyship’s venturing to reply, after an hesitation, “Do let him come, Mr. Robinson; let him be near you! I wonder whether you know that — that he has a great affection for you.”

“The more fool he; I have always treated him like a brute!” Hyacinth exclaimed, coloring.

The way Lady Aurora spoke proved to him, later, that she now definitely did know his secret, or one of them, rather; for at the rate things had been going for the last few months he was regularly making a collection. She knew the smaller — not, of course, the greater; she had, decidedly, been illuminated by Pinnie’s divagations. At the moment he made that reflection, however, be was almost startled to perceive how completely he had ceased to resent such betrayals, and how little it suddenly seemed to signify that the innocent source of them was about to be quenched. The sense of his larger secret swallowed up that particular anxiety, making him ask himself what it mattered, for the time that was left to him. that people should whisper to each other his little mystery. The day came quickly when he believed, and yet didn’t care, that it had been universally imparted.

After Lady Aurora left him, promising she would call him the first moment it should seem prudent, he walked up and down the little cold, stale parlor, immersed in his meditations. The shock of the danger of losing Pinnie had already passed away; he had achieved so much, of late, in the line of accepting the idea of death that the little dressmaker, in taking her departure, seemed already to benefit by this curious discipline. What was most vivid to him, in the deserted scene of Pinnie’s unsuccessful labor, was the changed vision with which he had come back to objects familiar for twenty years. The picture was the same, and all its horrid elements, wearing a kind of greasy gloss in the impure air of Lomax Place; it made, through the mean windowpanes, a dismal chiaroscuro — showed, in their polished misery, the friction of his own little life; but the eyes with which he looked at it had new terms of comparison. He had known the place was hideous and sordid, but its aspect to-day was pitiful to the verge of the sickening; he couldn’t believe that for years together he had accepted, and even, a little, revered it. He was frightened at the sort of service that his experience of

grandeur had rendered him. It was all very well to have assimilated that element with a rapidity which had surprises even for himself; but with sensibilities now so improved, what fresh arrangement could one come to with the very humble, which was in its nature uncompromising? Though the spring was far advanced, the day was a dark drizzle, and the room had the clamminess of a finished use, an ooze of dampness from the muddy street, where the areas were a narrow slit. No wonder Pinnie had felt it at last, and her small, underfed organism had grown numb and ceased to act. At the thought of her limited, stinted life, the patient, humdrum effort of her needle and scissors, which had ended only in a showroom where there was nothing to show, and a pensive reference to the cut of sleeves no longer worn, the tears again rose to his eyes; but he brushed them aside when he heard a cautious tinkle at the house-door, which was presently opened by the little besmirched slavey retained for the service of the solitary lodger — a domestic easily bewildered, who had a squint, and distressed Hyacinth by wearing shoes that didn't match, though they were of an equal antiquity and resembled each other in the facility with which they dropped off. Hyacinth had not heard Mr. Vetch's voice in the hall, apparently because he spoke in a whisper; but the young man was not surprised when, taking every precaution not to make the door creak, he came into the parlor. The fiddler said nothing to him at first; the two men only looked at each other for a long minute. Hyacinth saw what he most wanted to know — whether he knew the worst about Pinnie; but what was further in his eyes (they had an expression considerably different from any he had hitherto seen in them) defined itself to our hero only little by little.

"Don't you think you might have written me a word?" said Hyacinth, at last. His anger at having been left in ignorance had quitted him, but he thought the question fair. None the less, he expected a sarcastic answer, and was surprised at the mild reasonableness with which Mr. Vetch replied —

"I assure you, no responsibility, in the course of my life, ever did more to distress me. There were obvious reasons for calling you back, and yet I couldn't help wishing you might finish your visit. I balanced one thing against the other; it was very difficult."

"I can imagine nothing more simple. When people's nearest and dearest are dying, they are usually sent for."

The fiddler gave a strange, argumentative smile. If Lomax Place and Miss Pynsent's select lodging-house wore a new face of vulgarity to Hyacinth, it may be imagined whether the scrubby seediness which had come over Mr. Vetch in his old age was unlikely to lend itself to comparison. The glossy butler at Medley had had a hundred more of the signs of success in life. "My dear boy, this case was exceptional," said the old man. "Your visit had a character of importance."

"I don't know what you know about it. I don't remember that I told you anything."

"No, certainly, you have never told me much. But if, as is probable, you have seen that kind lady who is now upstairs, you will have learned that Pinnie made a tremendous point of your not being disturbed. She threatened us with her displeasure if we should hurry yon back. You know what Pinnie's displeasure is." As, at this, Hyacinth turned away with a gesture of irritation, Mr. Vetch went on, "No doubt she is absurdly fanciful, poor, dear thing; but don't, now, cast any disrespect upon it. I assure you, if she had been here alone, suffering, sinking, without a creature to tend her, and nothing before her but to die in a corner, like a starved cat, she would still have faced that fate rather than cut short by a single hour your experience of novel scenes."

Hyacinth was silent for a moment. "Of course I know what you mean. But she spun her delusion — she always did, all of them — out of nothing. I can't imagine what she knows about my 'experience' of any kind of scenes. I told her, when I went out of town, very little more than I told you."

"What she guessed, what she gathered, has been, at any rate, enough. She has made up her mind that you have formed a relation by means of which you will come, somehow or other, into your own. She has done nothing but talk about your grand kindred. To her mind, you know, it's all one, the aristocracy, and nothing is simpler than that the person — very exalted, as she believes — with whom you have been to stay should undertake your business with her friends."

"Oh, well," said Hyacinth, "I'm very glad not to have deprived you of that entertainment."

"I assure you the spectacle was exquisite." Then the fiddler added, "My dear fellow, please leave her the idea."

"Leave it? I'll do much more!" Hyacinth exclaimed. "I'll tell her my great relations have adopted me, and that I have come back Lord Robinson."

"She will need nothing more to die happy," Mr. Vetch remarked.

Five minutes later, after Hyacinth had obtained from his old friend a confirmation of Lady Aurora's account of Miss Pynsent's condition, Mr. Vetch explaining that he came over, like that, to see how she was half a dozen times a day — five minutes later a silence had descended upon the pair, while Hyacinth waited for some sign from Lady Aurora that he might come upstairs. The fiddler, who had lighted a pipe, looked out of the window, studying intently the physiognomy of Lomax Place; and Hyacinth, making his tread discreet, walked about the room with his hands in his pockets. At last Mr. Vetch observed, without taking his pipe out of his lips, or looking round, "I think you might be a little more frank with me at this time of day, and at such a crisis."

Hyacinth stopped in his walk, wondering for a moment, sincerely, what his companion meant, for he had no consciousness, at present, of an effort to conceal anything he could possibly tell (there were some things, of course, he couldn't); on the contrary, his life seemed to him particularly open to the public view, and exposed

to invidious comment. It was at this moment he first observed a certain difference; there was a tone in Mr. Vetch's voice that he had never perceived before — an absence of that note which had made him say, in other days, that the impenetrable old man was diverting himself at his expense. It was as if his attitude had changed, become more explicitly considerate, in consequence of some alteration or promotion on Hyacinth's part, his having grown older, or more important, or even, simply, more surpassingly curious. If the first impression made upon him by Pinnie's old neighbor, as to whose place in the list of the sacrificial (his being a gentleman or one of the sovereign people) he formerly was so perplexed; if the sentiment excited by Mr. Vetch in a mind familiar now for nearly a month with forms of indubitable gentility was not favorable to the idea of fraternization, this secret impatience on Hyacinth's part was speedily corrected by one of the sudden reactions or quick conversions of which the young man was so often the victim. In the light of the fiddler's appeal, which evidently meant more than it said; his musty antiquity; his typical look of having had, for years, a small, definite use, and taken all the creases and dents of it; his visible expression, even, of ultimate parsimony, and of having ceased to care for his appearance because he cared more for something else — these things became so many reasons for turning round, going over to him, touching signs of an invincible fidelity, the humble, continuous, single-minded practice of daily duties and an art after all very charming; pursued, moreover, while persons of the species our restored prodigal had lately been consorting with fidgeted from one selfish sensation to another, and couldn't even live in the same place for three months together. "What should you like me to do, to say, to tell you? Do you want to know what I have been doing in the country? I should have first to know, myself," Hyacinth said.

"Have you enjoyed it very much?"

"Yes, certainly, very much — not knowing anything about Pinnie. I have been in a beautiful house, with a beautiful woman."

Mr. Vetch had turned round; he looked very solemn, through the smoke of his pipe.

"Is she really a princess?"

"I don't know what you mean by 'really.' I suppose all titles are great rot. But every one seems agreed to call her so."

"You know I have always liked to enter into your life; and to-day the wish is stronger than ever," the old man remarked, presently, fixing his eyes very steadily on Hyacinth's.

The latter returned his gaze for a moment; then he asked, "What makes you say that just now?"

The fiddler appeared to deliberate upon his answer, and at last he replied, "Because you are in danger of losing the best friend you have ever had."

"Be sure I feel it. But if I have got you" — Hyacinth added.

"Oh, me! I'm very old, and very tired of life."

"Yes, I suppose that that's what one arrives at. Well, if I can help you in any way, you must lean on me, you must make use of me."

"That's precisely what I was going to say to you," said Mr. Vetch. "Should you like any money?"

"Of course I should! But why should you offer it to me?"

"Because in saving it up, little by little, I have had you in mind."

"Dear Mr. Vetch," said Hyacinth, "you have me too much in mind. I'm not worth it, please believe that; for all sorts of reasons. I should make money enough for any uses I have for it, or have any right to have, if I stayed quietly in London and attended to my work. As you know, I can earn a decent living."

"Yes, I can see that. But if yon stayed quietly in London, what would become of your princess?"

" Oh, they can always manage, ladies in that position."

"Hanged if I understand her position!" cried Mr. Vetch, but without laughing. "You have been for three weeks without work, and yet you look uncommonly smart."

"You see, my living has cost me nothing. When you stay with great people you don't pay your score," Hyacinth explained, with great gentleness. "Moreover, the lady whose hospitality I have been enjoying has made me a very handsome offer of work."

"What kind of work?"

"The only kind I know. She is going to send me a lot of books, to do up for her."

"And to pay you fancy prices?"

"Oh, no; I am to fix the prices myself."

"Are not transactions of that kind rather disagreeable, with a lady whose hospitality one has been enjoying?" Mr. Vetch inquired.

"Exceedingly! That is exactly why I shall do the books, and then take no money."

"Your princess is rather clever!" the fiddler exclaimed, in a moment, smiling.

"Well, she can't force me to take it, if I won't," said Hyacinth.

"No; you must only let me do that."

"You have curious ideas about me," the young man observed.

Mr. Vetch turned about to the window again, remarking that he had curious ideas about everything. Then he added, after an interval —

"And have you been making love to your great lady?"

He had expected a flush of impatience in reply to this inquiry, and was rather surprised at the manner in

which Hyacinth answered: “How shall I explain? It is not a question of that sort.”

“Has she been making love to you, then?”

“If you should ever see her, you would understand how absurd that supposition is.”

“How shall I ever see her?” returned Mr. Vetch. “In the absence of that privilege, I think there is something in my idea.”

“She looks quite over my head,” said Hyacinth, simply. “It’s by no means impossible you may see her. She wants to know my friends, to know the people who live in the Place. And she would take a particular interest in you, on account of your opinions.”

“Ah, I have no opinions now, none any more!” the old man declared, sadly. “I only had them to frighten Pinnie.”

“She was easily frightened,” said Hyacinth.

“Yes, and easily reassured. Well, I like to know about your life,” his neighbor sighed, irrelevantly. “But take care the great lady doesn’t lead you too far.”

“How do you mean, too far?”

“Isn’t she a conspirator, a revolutionist? Doesn’t she go in for a general rectification, as Eustace calls it?”

Hyacinth was silent a moment. “You should see the place — you should see what she wears, what she eats and drinks.”

“Ah, you mean that she’s inconsistent with her theories? My dear boy, she would be a droll woman if she were not. At any rate, I’m glad of it.”

“Glad of it?” Hyacinth repeated.

“For you, I mean, when you stay with her; it’s more luxurious!” Mr. Vetch exclaimed, turning round and smiling. At this moment a little rap on the floor above, given by Lady Aurora, announced that Hyacinth might at last come up and see Pinnie. Mr. Vetch listened and recognized it, and it led him to say, with considerable force, “There’s a woman whose theories and conduct do square!”

Hyacinth, on the threshold, leaving the room, stopped long enough to reply, “Well, when the day comes for my friend to give up — you’ll see.”

“Yes, I have no doubt there are things she will bring herself to sacrifice,” the old man remarked; but Hyacinth was already out of hearing.

Chapter XXVIII

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MR. VETCH WAITED below till Lady Aurora should come down and give him the news he was in suspense for. His mind was pretty well made up about Pinnie. It had seemed to him, the night before, that death was written in her face, and he judged it on the whole a very good moment for her to lay down her earthly burden. He had reasons for believing that the future could not be sweet to her. As regards Hyacinth, his mind was far from being at ease; for though he was aware, in a general way, that he had taken up with strange company, and though he had flattered himself, of old, that he should be pleased to see the boy act out his life and solve the problem of his queer inheritance, he was worried by the absence of full knowledge. He put out his pipe, in anticipation of Lady Aurora’s reappearance, and without this consoler he was more accessible still to certain fears that had come to him in consequence of a recent talk, or rather an attempt at a talk, with Eustache Poupin. It was through the Frenchman that he had gathered the little he knew about the occasion of Hyacinth’s unprecedented excursion. His ideas on the subject had been very inferential; for Hyacinth had made a mystery of his absence to Pinnie, merely letting her know that there was a lady in the case, and that the best luggage he could muster and the best way his shirts could be done up would still not be good enough. Poupin had seen Godfrey Sholto at the Sun and Moon, and it had come to him, through Hyacinth, that there was a remarkable feminine influence in the captain’s life, and mixed up in some way with his presence in Bloomsbury — an influence, moreover, by which Hyacinth himself, for good or for evil, was in peril of being touched. Sholto was the young man’s visible link with a society for which Lisson Grove could have no importance in the scheme of the universe, but as a short cut (too disagreeable to be frequently used) out of Bayswater; therefore, if Hyacinth left town with a new hat and a pair of kid gloves, it must have been to move in the direction of that superior circle, and in some degree, at least, at the solicitation of the beforementioned feminine influence. So much as this the Frenchman suggested, explicitly enough, as his manner was, to the old fiddler; but his talk had a flavor of other references which excited Mr. Vetch’s curiosity much more than they satisfied it. They were obscure; they evidently were painful to the speaker; they were confused and embarrassed, and totally wanting in the luminosity which usually characterized the lightest allusions of M. Poupin. It was the fiddler’s fancy that his friend had something on his mind which he was not at liberty to impart, and that it related to Hyacinth, and might, for those who took an interest in the singular lad, constitute a considerable anxiety. Mr. Vetch, on his own part, nursed this anxiety into a tolerably definite shape: he persuaded himself that the Frenchman had been leading the boy too far in the line of social criticism, had given him a push on some crooked path where a fall would be a likely incident. When, on a subsequent occasion, with Poupin, he

indulged in a hint of this suspicion, the bookbinder flushed a good deal, and declared that his conscience was pure. It was one of his peculiarities that when his color rose he looked angry, and Mr. Vetch held that his displeasure was a proof that, in spite of his repudiations, he had been unwise; though before they parted Eustache gave this sign of softness, that he shed tears of emotion, of which the reason was not clear to the fiddler, and which appeared, in a general way, to be dedicated to Hyacinth. The interview had taken place in Lisson Grove, where Madame Poupin, however, had not shown herself.

Altogether the old man was a prey to suppositions, which led him to feel how much he himself had outlived the democratic glow of his prime. He had ended by accepting everything (though, indeed, he couldn't swallow the idea that a trick should be played upon Hyacinth), and even by taking an interest in current polities, as to which, of old, he had held the opinion (the same that the Poupins held to-day) that they had been invented on purpose to throw dust in the eyes of disinterested reformers, and to circumvent the social solution. He had given up that problem some time ago; there was no way to clear it up that didn't seem to make a bigger mess than the actual muddle of human affairs, which, by the time one had reached sixty-five, had mostly ceased to exasperate. Mr. Vetch could still feel a certain sharpness on the subject of the prayer-book and the bishops; and if at moments he was a little ashamed of having accepted this world, he could reflect that at all events he continued to repudiate the other. The idea of great changes, however, took its place among the dreams of his youth; for what was any possible change in the relations of men and women but a new combination of the same elements? If the elements could be made different the thing would be worth thinking of; but it was not only impossible to introduce any new ones — no means had yet been discovered for getting rid of the old. The figures on the chessboard were still the passions and jealousies and superstitions and stupidities of man, and their position with regard to each other, at any given moment, could be of interest only to the grim, invisible fates that played the game — that sat, through the ages, bow-backed over the table. This laxity had come upon the old man with the increase of his measurement round the waist, of the little heap of half-crowns and half-sovereigns that had accumulated in a tin box with a very stiff padlock, which he kept under his bed, and of the interwoven threads of sentiment and custom that united him to the dressmaker and her foster-son. If he was no longer pressing about the demands he felt he should have a right to make of society, as he had been in the days when his conversation scandalized Pinnie, so he was now not pressing for Hyacinth, either; reflecting that though, indeed, the constituted powers might have to "count" with him, it would be in better taste for him not to be importunate about a settlement. What he had come to fear for him was that he should be precipitated by crude force, with results in which the deplorable might not exclude the ridiculous. It may even be said that Mr. Vetch had a secret project of settling a little on his behalf.

Lady Aurora peeped into the room, very noiselessly, nearly half an hour after Hyacinth had left it, and let the fiddler know that she was called to other duties, but that the nurse had come back, and the doctor had promised to look in at five o'clock. She herself would return in the evening, and, meanwhile, Hyacinth was with his aunt, who had recognized him, without a protest; indeed, seemed intensely happy that he should be near her again, and lay there with closed eyes, very weak and speechless, with his hand in hers. Her restlessness had passed and her fever abated, but she had no pulse to speak of, and Lady Aurora did not disguise the fact that, in her opinion, she was rapidly sinking. Mr. Vetch had already accepted it, and after her ladyship had quitted him he lighted another philosophic pipe upon it, lingering on, till the doctor came, in the dressmaker's dismal, forsaken bower, where, in past years, he had indulged in so many sociable droppings-in and in hot tumblers. The echo of all her little simple surprises and pointless contradictions, her gasping reception of contemplative paradox, seemed still to float in the air; but the place felt as relinquished and bereaved as if she were already beneath the sod. Pinnie had always been a wonderful hand at "putting away;" the litter that testified to her most elaborate efforts was often immense, but the reaction in favor of an unspeckled carpet was greater still; and on the present occasion, before taking to her bed, she had found strength to sweep and set in order as daintily as if she had been sure that the room would never again know her care. Even to the old fiddler, who had not Hyacinth's sensibility to the mise-en-scene of life, it had the cold propriety of a place arranged for an interment. After the doctor had seen Pinnie, that afternoon, there was no doubt left as to its soon being the scene of dismal preliminaries. Miss Pynsent, however, resisted her malady for nearly a fortnight more, during which Hyacinth was constantly in her room. He never went back to Mr. Crookenden's, with whose establishment, through violent causes, his relations .seemed indefinitely suspended; and in fact, for the rest of the time that Pinnie demanded his care, he absented himself but twice from Lomax Place for more than a few minutes. On one of these occasions he traveled over to Audley Court and spent an hour there; on the other he met Millicent Henning, by appointment, and took a walk with her on the embankment. He tried to find a moment to go and thank Madame Poupin for a sympathetic offering, many times repeated, of tisane, concocted after a receipt thought supreme by the couple in Lisson Grove (though little appreciated in the neighborhood generally); but he was obliged to acknowledge her kindness only by a respectful letter, which he composed with some trouble, though much elation, in the French tongue, peculiarly favorable, as he believed, to little courtesies of this kind. Lady Aurora came again and again to the darkened house, where she diffused her beneficent influence in nightly watches; in the most modern sanative suggestions; in conversations with Hyacinth, directed with more ingenuity than her fluttered embarrassments might have led one to attribute to her, to the purpose of diverting his mind; and in tea-makings (there was a great deal of this liquid consumed on the premises during Pinnie's illness), after a system more enlightened

than the usual fashion of Pentonville. She was the bearer of several messages and of a good deal of medical advice from Rose Muniment, whose interest in the dressmaker's case irritated Hyacinth by its cheerfulness, which even at second-hand was still obtrusive; she appeared very nearly as resigned to the troubles of others as she was to her own.

Hyacinth had been seized, the day after his return from Medley, with a sharp desire to do something enterprising and superior on Pinnie's behalf. He felt the pressure of a sort of angry sense that she was dying of her poor career, of her uneffaced remorse for the trick she had played him in his boyhood (as if he hadn't long ago, and indeed at the time, forgiven it, judging it to have been the highest wisdom!), of something basely helpless in the attitude of her little circle. He wanted to do something which should prove to himself that he had got the best opinion about the invalid that it was possible to have: so he insisted that Mr. Buffery should consult with a West End doctor, if the West End doctor would consent to meet Mr. Buffery. A physician capable of this condescension was discovered through Lady Aurora's agency (she had not brought him of her own movement, because, on the one hand, she hesitated to impose on the little household in Lomax Place the expense of such a visit; and on the other, with all her narrow personal economies for the sake of her charities, had not the means to meet it herself); and in prevision of the great man's fee Hyacinth applied to Mr. Vetch, as he had applied before, for a loan. The great man came, and was wonderfully civil to Mr. Buffery, whose conduct of the case he pronounced judicious; he remained several minutes in the house, while he gazed at Hyacinth over his spectacles (he seemed rather more occupied with him than with the patient), and almost the whole of the Place turned out to stare at his chariot. After all, he consented to accept 110 fee. He put the question aside with a gesture full of urbanity — a course disappointing and displeasing to Hyacinth, who felt in a manner cheated of the full effect of the fine thing he had wished to do for Pinnie; though when he said as much (or something like it) to Mr. Vetch, the caustic fiddler greeted the observation with a face of amusement which, considering the situation, verged upon the unseemly.

Hyacinth, at any rate, had done the best he could, and the fashionable doctor had left directions which foreshadowed relations with an expensive chemist in Bond Street — a prospect by which our young man was to some extent consoled. Poor Pinnie's decline, however, was not arrested, and one evening, more than a week after his return from Medley, as he sat with her alone, it seemed to Hyacinth that her spirit must already have passed away. The nurse had gone down to her supper, and a perceptible odor, on the staircase, of fizzling bacon indicated that a more cheerful state of things prevailed in the lower regions. Hyacinth could not make out whether Miss Pynsent were asleep or awake; he believed she had not lost consciousness, yet for more than an hour she had given no sign of life. At last she put out her hand, as if she knew he was near her and wished to feel for his, and murmured, "Why did she come? I didn't want to see her." In a moment, as she went on, he perceived to whom she was alluding: her mind had traveled back, through all the years, to the dreadful day (she had described every incident of it to him) when Mrs. Bowerbank had invaded her quiet life and startled her sensitive conscience with a message from the prison. "She sat there so long — so long. She was very large, and I was frightened. She moaned, and moaned, and cried — too dreadful. I couldn't help it — I couldn't help it!" Her thought wandered from Mrs. Bowerbank in the discomposed showroom, enthroned on the yellow sofa, to the tragic creature at Milbank, whose accents again, for the hour, lived in her ears; and mixed with this mingled vision was still the haunting sense that she herself might have acted differently. That had been cleared up in the past, so far as Hyacinth's intention was concerned; but what was most alive in Pinnie at the present moment was the passion of repentance, of still further expiation. It sickened Hyacinth that she should believe these things were still necessary, and be leaned over her and talked tenderly, with words of comfort and reassurance. He told her not to think of that dismal, far-off time, which had ceased, long ago, to have any consequences for either of them; to consider only the future, when she should be quite strong again, and he would look after her, and keep her all to himself, and take care of her better, far better, than he had ever done before. He had thought of many things while he sat with Pinnie, watching the shadows made by the night-lamp — high, imposing shadows of objects low and mean — and among them he had followed, with an imagination that went further in that direction than ever before, the probable consequences of his not having been adopted in his babyhood by the dressmaker. The workhouse and the gutter, ignorance and cold, filth and tatters, nights of huddling under bridges and in doorways, vermin, starvation and blows, possibly even the vigorous efflorescence of an inherited disposition to crime — these things, which he saw with unprecedented vividness, suggested themselves as his natural portion. Intimacies with a princess, visits to fine old country-houses, intelligent consideration, even, of the best means of inflicting a scare on the classes of privilege, would in that case not have been within his compass; and that Pinnie should have rescued him from such a destiny and put these luxuries within his reach was an amelioration which really amounted to success, if he could only have the magnanimity to regard it so.

Her eyes were open and fixed on him, but the sharp ray the little dressmaker used to direct into Lomax Place as she plied her needle at the window had completely left them. "Not there — what should I do there?" she inquired, very softly. "Not with the great — the great" — and her voice failed.

"The great what? What do you mean?"

"You know — you know," she went on, making another effort. "Haven't you been with them? Haven't they received you?"

"Ah, they won't separate us, Pinnie; they won't come between us as much as that," said Hyacinth, kneeling

by her bed.

"You must be separate — that makes me happier. I knew they would find you at last."

"Poor Pinnie, poor Pinnie," murmured the young man.

"It was only for that — now I'm going," she went on.

"If you'll stay with me, you needn't fear," said Hyacinth, smiling at, her.

"Oh, what would they think?" asked the dressmaker.

"I like you best," said Hyacinth.

"You have had me always! Now it's their turn; they have waited."

"Yes, indeed, they have waited!" Hyacinth exclaimed.

"But they will make it up; they will make up everything!" the invalid panted. Then she added, "I couldn't — couldn't help it!" — which was the last flicker of her strength. She gave no further sign of consciousness, and three days later she ceased to breathe. Hyacinth was with her, and Lady Aurora, but neither of them could recognize the moment.

Hyacinth and Mr. Vetch carried her bier, with the help of Eustache Poupin and Paul Muniment. Lady Aurora was at the funeral, and Madame Poupin as well, and twenty neighbors from Lomax Place; but the most distinguished person (in appearance, at least) in the group of mourners was Millicent Henning, the grave yet brilliant beauty of whose countenance, the high propriety of whose demeanor, and the fine taste and general style of whose black "costume" excited no little attention. Mr. Vetch had his idea; he had been nursing it ever since Hyacinth's return from Medley, and three days after Pinnie had been consigned to the earth he broached it to his young friend. The funeral had been on a Friday, and Hyacinth had mentioned to him that he should return to Mr. Crookenden's on the Monday morning. This was Sunday night, and Hyacinth had been out for a walk, neither with Millicent Henning nor with Paul Muniment, but alone, after the manner of old days. When he came in he found the fiddler waiting for him, and burning a tallow candle, in the blighted showroom. He had three or four little papers in his hand, which exhibited some jottings of his pencil, and Hyacinth guessed, what was the truth, but not all the truth, that he had come to speak to him about business. Pinnie had left a little will, of which she had appointed her old friend executor; this fact had already become known to our hero, who thought such an arrangement highly natural. Mr. Vetch informed him of the purport of this simple and judicious document, and mentioned that he had been looking into the dressmaker's "affairs." They consisted, poor Pinnie's affairs, of the furniture of the house in Lomax Place, of the obligation to pay the remainder of a quarter's rent, and of a sum of money in the savings - bank. Hyacinth was surprised to learn that Pinnie's economies had produced fruit at this late day (things had gone so ill with her in recent years, and there had been often such a want of money in the house), until Mr. Vetch explained to him, with genial frankness, that he himself had watched over the little hoard, accumulated during the period of her comparative prosperity, with the stiff determination that it should be sacrificed only in case of desperate necessity. Work had become scarce with Pinnie, but she could still do it when it came, and the money was to be kept for the very possible period when she should be helpless. Mercifully enough, she had not lived to see that day, and the sum in the bank had survived her, though diminished by more than half. She had left no debts but the matter of the house and those incurred during her illness. Of course the fiddler had known — he hastened to give his young friend this assurance — that Pinnie, had she become infirm, would have been able to count absolutely upon him for the equivalent, in her old age, of the protection she had given him in his youth. But what if an accident had overtaken Hyacinth? What if he had incurred some nasty penalty for his revolutionary dabblings, which, little dangerous as they might be to society, were quite capable, in a country where authority, though goodnatured, liked occasionally to make an example, to put him on the wrong side of a prison-wall? At any rate, for better or worse, by pinching and scraping, she had saved a little, and of that little, after everything was paid off, a fraction would still be left. Everything was bequeathed to Hyacinth — everything but a couple of plated candlesticks and the old chiffonier, which had been so handsome in its day; these Pinnie begged Mr. Vetch to accept in recognition of services beyond all price. The furniture, everything he didn't want for his own use, Hyacinth could sell in a lump, and with the proceeds he could wipe out old scores. The sum of money would remain to him; it amounted, in its reduced condition, to about thirty-seven pounds. In mentioning this figure Mr. Vetch appeared to imply that Hyacinth would be master of a very pretty little fortune. Even to the young man himself, in spite of his recent initiations, it seemed far from contemptible; it represented sudden possibilities of still not returning to old Crookenden's. It represented them, that is, till, presently, he remembered the various advances made him by the fiddler, and reflected that by the time these had been repaid there would hardly be twenty pounds left. That, however, was a far larger sum than he had ever had in his pocket at once. He thanked the old man for his information, and remarked — and there was no hypocrisy in the speech — that he was very sorry Pinnie had not given herself the benefit of the whole of the little fund in her lifetime. To this her executor replied that it had yielded her an interest far beyond any other investment; for he was persuaded she believed she should never live to enjoy it, and this faith was rich in pictures, visions of the effect such a windfall would produce in Hyacinth's career.

"What effect did she mean — do you mean?" Hyacinth inquired. As soon as he had spoken he felt that he knew what the old man would say (it would be a reference to Pinnie's belief in his reunion with his "relations," and the facilities that thirty-seven pounds would afford him for cutting a figure among them); and for a moment Mr. Vetch looked at him as if exactly that response were on his lips. At the end of the moment,

however, he replied, quite differently, —

"She hoped you would go abroad and see the world." The fiddler watched his young friend; then he added, "She had a particular wish that you should go to Paris."

Hyacinth had turned pale at this suggestion, and for a moment he said nothing. "Ah, Paris!" he murmured at last.

"She would have liked you even to take a little run down to Italy."

"Doubtless that would be pleasant. But there is a limit to what one can do with twenty pounds."

"How do you mean, with twenty pounds?" the old man asked, lifting his eyebrows, while the wrinkles in his forehead made deep shadows in the candlelight.

"That's about what will remain, after I have settled my account with you."

"How do you mean, your account with me? I shall not take any of your money."

Hyacinth's eyes wandered over his interlocutor's elderly rustiness. "I don't want to be ungracious, but suppose you should lose your powers."

"My dear boy, I shall have one of the resources that was open to Pinnie. I shall look to you to be the support of my old age."

"You may do so with perfect safety, except for that danger you just mentioned of my being imprisoned or hanged."

"It's precisely because I think it will be less if you go abroad that I urge you to take this chance. You'll see the world, and you'll like it better. You will think society, even as it is, has some good points," said Mr. Vetch.

"I have never liked it better than the last few months."

"Ah well, wait till you see Paris!"

"Oh, Paris — Paris," Hyacinth repeated, vaguely, staring into the turbid flame of the candle, as if he made out the most brilliant scenes there; an attitude, accent, and expression which the fiddler interpreted both as the vibration of a latent hereditary chord and a symptom of the acute sense of opportunity.

Chapter XXIX

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THE BOULEVARD WAS all alive, brilliant with illuminations, with the variety and gayety of the crowd; the dazzle of shops and cafes seen through uncovered fronts or immense lucid plates; the flamboyant porches of theatres and the flashing lamps of carriages; the far-spreading murmur of talkers and strollers, the uproar of pleasure and prosperity, the general magnificence of Paris on a perfect evening in June — the high-pitched, many-voiced Paris of the latter part of the Second Empire, the arbitress of Europe, the source of every sensation, wound up to a sort of sensual ecstasy and unconscious of her doom. Hyacinth had been walking about all day — he had walked from rising till bedtime every day of the week that had elapsed since his arrival — and now an extraordinary fatigue, which, however, was not without its delight (there was a kind of richness, a sweet satiety, in it), a tremendous lassitude, had fallen upon him, and he settled himself in a chair beside a little table in front of Tortoni's, not so much to rest from it as to enjoy it. He had seen so much, felt so much, learned so much, thrilled and throbbed and laughed and sighed so much, during the past several days, that he was conscious at last of the danger of becoming incoherent to himself, of the need of balancing his accounts.

Tonight he came to a full stop; he simply sat at the door of the most dandified cafe in Paris, and felt his pulse and took stock of his impressions. He had been intending to visit the Varietes theatre, which blazed through intermediate lights and through the thin foliage of trees not favored by the asphalt, on the other side of the great avenue. But the impression of Schneider — he relinquished that, for the present; it added to the luxury of his situation to reflect that he should still have plenty of time to see the Grande Duchesse. The same effect proceeded from his determination to order a marquise, when the waiter, whose superior shirtfront and whisker emerged from the long white cylinder of an apron, came to take his commands. He knew the decoction was expensive — he had learnt as much at the moment he happened to overhear, for the first time, a mention of it; which had been the night before, in his place in a stall, during an entr'acte, at the Comedie Franchise. A gentleman beside him, a young man in evening-dress, conversing with an acquaintance in the row behind, recommended the latter to refresh himself with the article in question after the play: there was nothing like it, the speaker remarked, of a hot evening, in the open air, when one was thirsty. The waiter brought Hyacinth a tall glass of champagne, in which a pineapple ice was in solution, and our hero felt that he had hoped for a sensation no less delicate when he looked for an empty table on Tortoni's terrace. Very few tables were empty, and it was his belief that the others were occupied by high celebrities; at any rate, they were just the types he had had a prevision of and had wanted most to meet, when the extraordinary opportunity to come abroad with his pocket full of money (it was more extraordinary, even, than his original meeting with the Princess) became real to him in Lomax Place. He knew about Tortoni's from his study of the French novel, and as he sat there he had a vague sense of fraternizing with Balzac and Alfred de Musset; there were echoes and reminiscences of their works in the air, confounding themselves with the indefinable exhalations, the strange

composite odor, half agreeable, half impure, of the boulevard. “Splendid Paris, charming Paris” — that refrain, the fragment of an invocation, a beginning without an end, hummed itself perpetually in Hyacinth’s ears; the only articulate words that got themselves uttered in the hymn of praise which his imagination had been offering to the French capital from the first hour of his stay. He recognized, he greeted, with a thousand palpitations, the seat of his maternal ancestors, and he was proud to be associated with so much splendor, so many proofs of a civilization that had no visible rough spots. He had his perplexities, and he had even now and then a revulsion for which he had made no allowance, as when it came over him that the most brilliant city in the world was also the most bloodstained; but the great sense that he understood and sympathized was preponderant, and his comprehension gave him wings — appeared to transport him to still wider fields of knowledge, still higher sensations.

In other days, in London, he had thought again and again of his mother’s father, the revolutionary watchmaker, who had known the ecstasy of the barricade and had paid for it with his life, and his reveries had not been sensibly chilled by the fact that he knew next to nothing about him. He figured him in his mind, had a conviction that he was very short, like himself, and had curly hair, an immense talent for his work, and an extraordinary natural eloquence, together with many of the most attractive qualities of the French character. But he was reckless and a little cracked, and probably immoral; he had difficulties and debts and irrepressible passions; his life had been an incurable fever, and its tragic termination was a matter of course. None the less, it would have been a charm to hear him talk, to feel the influence of a gayety which even political madness could never quench; for his grandson had a theory that he spoke the French tongue of an earlier time, delightful and sociable in accent and phrase, exempt from the commonness of modern slang. This vague yet vivid personage became Hyacinth’s constant companion, from the day of his arrival: he roamed about with Florentine’s boy, hand in hand; sat opposite to him at dinner, at the little table in the restaurant; finished the bottle with him; made the bill a little longer; and treated him to innumerable revelations and counsels. He knew the lad’s secret without being told, and looked at him across the diminutive tablecloth, when the great tube of bread, pushed aside a little, left room for his elbows (it puzzled Hyacinth that the people of Paris should ever have had the fierceness of hunger when the loaves were so big), gazed at him with eyes of deep, kind, glowing comprehension, and with lips which seemed to murmur that when one was to die tomorrow one was wise to eat and drink to-day. There was nothing venerable, no constraint of importance or disapproval, in this edifying and impalpable presence; the young man considered that Hyacinthe Vivier was of his own time of life, and could enter into his pleasures as well as his pains. Wondering, repeatedly, where the barricade on which his grandfather fell had been erected, he at last satisfied himself (but I am unable to trace the process of the induction) that it had bristled across the Rue Saint-Honore, very near to the church of Saint-Roch. The pair had now roamed together through all the museums and gardens, through the principal churches (the republican martyr was very goodnatured about this), through the passages and arcades, up and down the great avenues, across all the bridges, and above all, again and again, along the river, where the quays were an endless entertainment to Hyacinth, who lingered by the half hour beside the boxes of old books on the parapets, stuffing his pockets with odd five-penny volumes, while the bright industries of the Seine flashed and glittered beneath him, and, on the other bank, the glorious Louvre stretched either way for a league. Our young man took almost the same sort of satisfaction in the Louvre as if he had invented it; he haunted the museum during all the first days, and couldn’t look enough at certain pictures, nor sufficiently admire the high polish of the great floors, in which the golden, frescoed ceilings reflected themselves. All Paris struck him as tremendously artistic and decorative; he felt as if, hitherto, he had lived in a dusky, frowzy, Philistine world, in which the taste was the taste of Little Peddlington, and the idea of beautiful arrangement had never had an influence. In his ancestral city it had been active from the first, and that was why his quick sensibility responded; and he murmured again his constant refrain, when the fairness of the great monuments arrested him, in the pearly, silvery light, or he saw them take gray-blue, delicate tones at the end of stately vistas. It seemed to him that Paris expressed herself, and did it in the grand style, while London remained vague and blurred, inarticulate, blunt, and dim.

Eustache Poupin had given him letters to three or four democratic friends, ardent votaries of the social question, who had by a miracle escaped the hard fate of exile, and, in spite of imperial tnou-chards and the periodical swoops of despotism, kept alive the sacred spark which would some day become a consuming flame. Hyacinth, however, had not had the thought of delivering these introductions; he had accepted them because Poupin had had such a solemn glee in writing them, and also because he had not the courage to let the couple in Lisson Grove know that since that terrible night at Hoffendahl’s a change had come over the spirit of his dream. He had not grown more concentrated; he had grown more relaxed, and it was inconsistent with relaxation that he should rummage out Poupin’s friends — one of whom lived in the Batignolles, and the others in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine — and pretend that he cared for what they cared for in the same way as they cared for it. What was supreme in his mind to-day was not the idea of how the society that surrounded him should be destroyed; it was, much more, the sense of the wonderful, precious things it had produced, of the brilliant, impressive fabric it had erected. That destruction was waiting for it there was forcible evidence, known to himself and others, to show; but since this truth had risen before him, in its magnitude, he had become conscious of a transfer, partial if not complete, of his sympathies; the same revulsion of which he had given a sign to the Princess in saying that now he pitied the rich, those that were regarded as happy. While the

evening passed, therefore, as he kept his place at Tortoni's, the emotion that was last to visit him was a compunction for not having put himself in relation with poor Poupin's friends, for having neglected to make the acquaintance of earnest people.

Who in the world, if one should come to that, was as earnest as he himself, or had given such signal even though secret proofs of it? He could lay that unction to his soul in spite of his having amused himself cynically, spent all his time in theatres, galleries, walks of pleasure. The feeling had not failed him with which he accepted Mr. Vetch's furtherance — the sense that since he was destined to perish in his flower he was right to make a dash at the beautiful, horrible world. That reflection had been natural enough, but what was strange was the fiddler's own impulse, his desire to do something pleasant for him, to beguile him and ship him off. What had been most odd in that was the way Mr. Vetch appeared to overlook the fact that his young friend had already had, that year, such an episode of dissipation as was surely rare in the experience of London artisans. This was one of the many things Hyacinth thought of; he thought of the others in turn and out of turn; it was almost the first time he had sat still long enough (except at the theatre) to collect himself. A hundred confused reverberations of the recent past crowded upon him, and he saw that he had lived more intensely in the previous six months than in all the rest of his existence. The succession of events finally straightened itself, and he tasted some of the rarest, strangest moments over again. His last week at Medley, in especial, had already become a kind of fable, the echo of a song; he could read it over like a story, gaze at it as he would have gazed at some exquisite picture. His visit there had been perfect to the end; and even the three days that Captain Sholto's sojourn lasted had not broken the spell, for the three more that had elapsed before his own departure (the Princess herself had given him the signal) were the most important of all. It was then the Princess had made it clear to him that she was in earnest, was prepared for the last sacrifice. She was now his standard of comparison, his authority, his measure, his perpetual reference; and in taking possession of his mind to this extent she had completely renewed it. She was altogether a new term, and now that he was in a foreign country he observed how much her conversation, itself so foreign, had prepared him to understand it. In Paris he saw, of course, a great many women, and he noticed almost all of them, especially the actresses; confronting, mentally, their movement, their speech, their manner of dressing, with that of his extraordinary friend. He judged that she was beyond them in every respect, though there were one or two actresses who had the air of trying to copy her.

The recollection of the last days he had spent with her affected him now like the touch of a tear-washed cheek. She had shed tears for him, and it was his suspicion that her secret idea was to frustrate the redemption of his vow to Hoffendahl, to the immeasurable body that Hoffendahl represented. She pretended to have accepted it, and what she said was simply that when he should have played his part she would engage to save him — to fling a cloud about him, as the goddess-mother of the Trojan hero used, in Virgil's poem, to escamoter Apneas. What she meant was, in his view, to prevent him from playing his part at all. She was earnest for herself, but not for him. The main result of his concentrated intimacy with her had been to make him feel that he was good enough for anything. When he had asked her, the last day, if he might write to her, she had said, Yes, but not for two or three weeks. He had written after Pinnie's death, and again just before coming abroad, and in doing so had taken account of something else she had said in regard to their correspondence — that she didn't wish vague phrases, protestations, or compliments; she wanted the realities of his life, the smallest, most personal details. Therefore he had treated her to the whole business of the break-up in Lomax Place, including the sale of the rickety furniture. He had told her what that transaction brought — a beggarly sum, but sufficient to help a little to pay debts; and he had informed her furthermore that one of the ways Mr. Vetch had taken to hurry him off to Paris was to offer him a present of thirty pounds out of his curious little hoard, to add to the sum already inherited from Pinnie — which, in a manner that none of Hyacinth's friends, of course, could possibly regard as frugal, or even as respectable, was now consecrated to a mere excursion. He even mentioned that he had ended by accepting the thirty pounds, adding that he feared there was something demoralizing in his peculiar situation (she would know what he meant by that): it disposed one to take what one could get, made one at least very tolerant of whims that happened to be munificent.

What he did not mention to the Princess was the manner in which he had been received by Paul Muniment and by Millicent Henning, on his return from Medley. Millicent's reception had been the queerest; it had been quite unexpectedly mild. She made him no scene of violence, and appeared to have given up the line of throwing a blur of recrimination over her own nefarious doings. She treated him as if she liked him for having got in with the swells; she had an appreciation of success which would lead her to handle him more tenderly now that he was really successful. She tried to make him describe the style of life that was led in a house where people were invited to stay like that, without having to pay, and she surprised him almost as much as she gratified him by not indulging in any of her former digs at the Princess. She was lavish of ejaculations when he answered certain of her questions — ejaculations that savored of Pimlico, "Oh, I say!" and "Oh, my stars!" — and he was more than ever struck with her detestable habit of saying, "Aye, that's where it is," when he had made some remark to which she wished to give an intelligent and sympathetic assent. But she didn't jeer at the Princess's private character; she stayed her satire, in a case where there was such an opening for it. Hyacinth reflected that this was lucky for her: he couldn't have stood it (nervous and anxious as he was about Pinnie), if she had had the bad taste, at such a time as that, to be profane and insulting. In that case he would

have broken with her completely — he would have been too disgusted. She displeased him enough, as it was, by her vulgar tricks of speech. There were two or three little recurrent irregularities that aggravated him to a degree quite out of proportion to their importance, as when she said “full up” for full, “sold out” for sold, or remarked to him that she supposed he was now going to chuck up his work at old Crookenden’s. These phrases had fallen upon his ear many a time before, but now they seemed almost unpardonable enough to quarrel about. Not that he had any wish to quarrel, for if the question had been pushed he would have admitted that to-day his intimacy with the Princess had caused any rights he might have had upon Millicent to lapse. Millicent did not push it, however; she only, it was evident, wished to convey to him that it was better for both parties they should respect each other’s liberty. A genial understanding on this subject was what Miss Henning desired, and Hyacinth forbade himself to inquire what use she proposed to make of her freedom. During the month that elapsed between Pinnie’s death and his visit to Paris he had seen her several times, for the respect for each other’s freedom had somehow not implied cessation of intercourse, and it was only natural she should have been soft to him in his bereaved condition. Hyacinth’s sentiment about Pinnie was deep, and Millicent was clever enough to guess it; the consequence of which was that on these occasions she was very soft indeed. She talked to him almost as if she had been his mother and he a convalescent child; called him her dear, and a young rascal, and her old boy; moralized a good deal; abstained from beer (till she learned he had inherited a fortune); and when he remarked, once (moralizing a little, too), that after the death of a person we have loved we are haunted by the memory of our failures of kindness, of generosity, rejoined, with a dignity that made the words almost a contribution to philosophy, “Yes, that’s where it is!”

Something in her behavior at this period had even made Hyacinth wonder whether there were not some mystical sign in his appearance, some subtle betrayal in the very expression of his face, of the predicament in which he had been placed by Diedrich Hoffendahl; he began to suspect afresh the operation of that “beastly attendrissement” he had detected of old in people who had the benefit of Miss Pynsent’s innuendoes. The compassion Millicent felt for him had never been one of the reasons why he liked her; it had fortunately been corrected, moreover, by his power to make her furious. This evening, on the boulevard, as he watched the interminable successions, one of the ideas that came to him was that it was odd he should like her even yet; for Heaven knew he liked the Princess better, and he had hitherto supposed that when a sentiment of this kind had the energy of a possession it made a clean sweep of all minor predilections. But it was clear to him that Millicent still existed for him; that he couldn’t feel he had quite done with her, or she with him; and that, in spite of his having now so many other things to admire, there was still a comfort in the recollection of her robust beauty and her primitive passions. Hyacinth thought of her as some clever young barbarian who in ancient days should have made a pilgrimage to Rome might have thought of a Dacian or Iberian mistress awaiting his return on the rough provincial shore. If Millicent considered his visit at a country-house a proof of the sort of success that awaited him (and how he reconciled this with the supposition that she perceived, as a ghostly irradiation, intermingled with his curly hair, the aureola of martyrdom, he would have had some difficulty in explaining), if Miss Henning considered, on his return from Medley, that he had taken his place on the winning side, it was only consistent of her to borrow a grandeur from his further excursion; and, indeed, by the time he was ready to start she spoke of the plan as if she had invented it herself, and even contributed materially to the funds required. It had been her theory, from the first, that she only liked people of spirit; and Hyacinth certainly had never had so much spirit as when he launched himself into Continental adventures. He could say to himself, quite without bitterness, that of course she would profit by his absence to put her relations with Sholto on a comfortable footing; yet, somehow, at this moment, as her face came back to him, amid the crowd of faces about him, it had not that gentleman’s picturesque shadow across it. It was the brilliancy of Paris, perhaps, that made him see things rosy; at any rate, he remembered with kindness something that she had said to him the last time he saw her, and that had touched him exceedingly at the moment. He had happened to observe to her, in a friendly way, that now Miss Pynsent had gone she was, with the exception of Mr. Vetch, the person in his whole circle who had known him longest. To this Millicent had replied that Mr. Vetch wouldn’t live forever, and then she should have the satisfaction of being his very oldest friend. “Oh, well, I sha’n’t live forever, either,” said Hyacinth; which led her to inquire whether by chance he had a weakness of the chest. “Not that I know of, but I might get killed in a row;” and when she broke out into scorn of his silly notion of turning everything up (as if any one wanted to know what a costermonger would like, or any of that low sort at the East End!), he amused himself with asking her if she were satisfied with the condition of society, and thought nothing ought to be done for people who, at the end of a lifetime of starvation wages, had only the reward of the hideous workhouse and a pauper’s grave.

“I shouldn’t be satisfied with anything, if ever you were to slip up,” Millicent answered, simply, looking at him with her beautiful boldness. Then she added, “There’s one thing I can tell you, Mr. Robinson: that if ever any one was to do you a turn” — And she paused again, tossing back the head she carried as if it were surmounted by a tiara, while Hyacinth inquired what would occur in that contingency. “Well, there’d be one left behind who would take it up!” she announced; and in the tone of the declaration there was something brave and genuine. It struck Hyacinth as a strange fate — though not stranger, after all, than his native circumstances — that one’s memory should come to be represented by a shopgirl overladen with bracelets of imitation silver; but he was reminded that Millicent was a fine specimen of a woman of a type opposed to the whining, and that in her free temperament many disparities were reconciled.

Chapter XXX

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ON THE OTHER HAND, the brilliancy of Paris had not much power to transfigure the impression made upon him by such intercourse with Paul Muniment as he had enjoyed during the weeks that followed Pinnie's death — an impression considerably more severe than any idea of renunciation or oblivion that could connect itself with Millicent. Why it should have had the taste of sadness was not altogether clear, for Muniment's voice was as distinct as any in the chorus of approbation excited by the news that Hyacinth was about to cultivate the most characteristic of the pleasures of gentility — a sympathetic unanimity, of which the effect was to place his journey to Paris in a light almost ridiculous. What had got into them all, and did they think he was good for nothing but to amuse himself? Mr. Vetch had been the most zealous, but the others clapped him on the back in almost exactly the same manner as he had seen his mates in Soho bring their palms down on one of their number when it was disclosed to them that his "missus" had made him yet once again a father. That had been Poupin's tone, and his wife's as well; and even poor Schinkel, with his everlasting bandage, whom he had met in Lisson Grove, appeared to think it necessary to remark that a little run across the Rhine, while he was about it, would open his eyes to a great many wonders. The Poupins shed tears of joy, and the letters which have already been mentioned, and which lay, day after day, on the mantelshelf of the little room our hero occupied in a hotel garni, tremendously tall and somewhat lopsided, in the Rue Jacob (that recommendation proceeded also from Lisson Grove, the garni being kept by a second cousin of Madame Eustache) — these valuable documents had been prepared by the obliging exile many days before his young friend was ready to start. It was almost refreshing to Hyacinth when old Crookenden, the sole outspoken dissentient, told him he was a blockhead to waste his money on the bloody French. This worthy employer of labor was evidently disgusted at such an innovation; if he wanted a little recreation, why couldn't he take it as it had been taken in Soho from the beginning of time, in the shape of a trip to Hampton Court or two or three days of alcoholic torpor? Old Crookenden was right. Hyacinth conceded freely that he was a blockhead, and was only a little uncomfortable that he couldn't explain why he didn't pretend not to be and had a kind of right to that compensatory luxury.

Paul guessed why, of course, and smiled approval with a candor which gave Hyacinth a strange, inexpressible heartache. He already knew that his friend's view of him was that he was ornamental and adapted to the lighter kinds of socialistic utility — constituted to show that the revolution was not necessarily brutal nor illiterate; but in the light of the cheerful stoicism with which Muniment regarded the sacrifice our hero was committed to, the latter had found it necessary to remodel a good deal his original conception of the young chemist's nature. The result of this process was not that he admired it less, but that he felt almost awestricken in the presence of it. There had been an element of that sort in his appreciation of Muniment from the first, but it had been infinitely deepened by the spectacle of his sublime consistency. Hyacinth felt that he himself could never have risen to that point. He was competent to make the promise to Hoffendahl, and he was equally competent to keep it; but he could not have had the same fortitude for another, could not have detached himself from personal prejudice so effectually as to put forward, in that way, for ,the terrible "job," a little chap he liked. That Muniment liked him it never occurred to Hyacinth to doubt, and certainly he had all the manner of it to-day: he had never been more good-humored, more placidly talkative; he was like an elder brother who knew that the "youngster" was clever, and was rather proud of it even when there was no one there to see. That air of suspending their partnership for the moment, which had usually marked him at the Sun and Moon, was never visible in other places; in Audley Court he only chaffed Hyacinth occasionally for taking him too seriously. To-day his young friend hardly knew just how to take him; the episode of which Hoffendahl was the central figure had, as far as one could see, made so little change in his life. As a conspirator he was so extraordinarily candid, and bitterness and denunciation so rarely sat on his lips. It was as if he had been ashamed to complain; and indeed, for himself, as the mouths went on, he had nothing particular to complain of. He had had a rise, at the chemical works, and a plan of getting a larger room for Rosy was under serious consideration. On behalf of others he never sounded the pathetic note — he thought that sort of thing unbusinesslike; and the most that he did in the way of expatiation on the wrongs of humanity was occasionally to mention certain statistics, certain "returns," in regard to the remuneration of industries, applications for employment, and the discharge of hands. In such matters as these he was deeply versed, and he moved in a dry statistical and scientific air in which it cost Hyacinth an effort of respiration to accompany him. Simple and kindly as he was, and thoughtful of the woes of beasts, attentive and merciful to small insects, and addicted even to kissing dirty babies in Audley Court, he sometimes emitted a short satiric gleam which showed that his esteem for the poor was small, and that if he had no illusions about the people who had got everything into their hands he had as few about those who had egregiously failed to do so. He was tremendously reasonable, which was largely why Hyacinth admired him, having a desire to be so himself, but finding it terribly difficult.

Muniment's absence of passion, his fresh-colored coolness, his easy, exact knowledge, the way he kept himself clean (except for the chemical stains on his hands) in circumstances of foul contact, constituted a group of qualities that had always appeared to Hyacinth singularly enviable. Most enviable of all was the force

that enabled him to sink personal sentiment where a great public good was to be attempted, and yet keep up the form of caring for that minor interest. It seemed to Hyacinth that if he had introduced a young fellow to Hoffendahl for his purposes, and Hoffendahl had accepted him on such a recommendation, and everything had been settled, he would have preferred never to look at the young fellow again. That was his weakness, and Muniment carried it off far otherwise. It must be added that he had never made an allusion to their visit to Hoffendahl; so that Hyacinth also, out of pride, held his tongue on the subject. If his friend didn't wish to express any sympathy for him, he was not going to beg for it (especially as he didn't want it) by restless references. It had originally been a surprise to him that Muniment should be willing to countenance a possible assassination; but, after all, none of his ideas were narrow (Hyacinth had a sense that they ripened all the while), and if a pistol-shot would do any good he was not the man to raise pedantic objections. It is true that, as regards his quiet acceptance of the predicament in which Hyacinth might be placed by it, our young man had given him the benefit of a certain amount of doubt; it had occurred to him that perhaps Muniment had his own reasons for believing that the summons from Hoffendahl would never really arrive, so that he might be only treating himself to the entertainment of judging of a little bookbinder's nerve. But in this case, why did he take an interest in the little bookbinder's going to Paris? That was a thing he would not have cared for, if he had held that in fact there was nothing to fear. He despised the sight of idleness, and in spite of the indulgence he had more than once been good enough to express on the subject of Hyacinth's epicurean tendencies, what he would have been most likely to say at present was, "Go to Paris? Go to the dickens! Haven't you been out at grass long enough for one while, didn't you lark enough in the country there with the noble lady, and hadn't you better take up your tools again, before you forget how to handle them?" Rosy had said something of that sort, in her free, familiar way (whatever her intention, she had been, in effect, only a little less sarcastic than old Crookenden): that Mr. Robinson was going in for a life of leisure, a life of luxury, like herself; she must congratulate him on having the means and the time. Oh, the time — that was the great thing! She could speak with knowledge, having always enjoyed these advantages herself. And she intimated — or was she mistaken? — that his good fortune emulated hers also in the matter of his having a high-born and beneficent friend (such a blessing, now he had lost dear Miss Pynsent), who covered him with little attentions. Rose Muniment, in short, had been more exasperating than ever.

The boulevard became even more brilliant as the evening went on, and Hyacinth wondered whether he had a right to occupy the same table for so many hours. The theatre on the other side discharged its multitude; the crowd thickened on the wide asphalt, on the terrace of the cafe; gentlemen, accompanied by ladies of whom he knew already how to characterize the type — des femmes tres-chic — passed into the portals of Tortoni. The nightly emanations of Paris seemed to rise more richly, to float and hang in the air, to mingle with the far-striking light and sound, to resolve itself into a thousand solicitations and opportunities, addressed, however, mainly to those in whose pockets the chink of a little loose gold might respond. Hyacinth's retrospections had not made him drowsy, but quite the reverse; he grew restless and excited, and a kind of pleasant terror of the place and hour entered into his blood. But it was nearly midnight, and he got up to walk home, taking the line of the boulevard toward the Madeleine. He passed down the Rue Royale, where comparative stillness reigned; and when he reached the Place de la Concorde, to cross the bridge which faces the Corps Legislatif, he found himself almost isolated. He had left the human swarm and the obstructed pavements behind, and the wide spaces of the splendid square lay quiet under the summer stars. The plash of the great fountains was audible, and he could almost hear the wind-stirred murmur of the little wood of the Tuileries on one side, and of the vague expanse of the Champs Elysees on the other. The place itself — the Place Louis Quinze, the Place de la Revolution — had given him a sensible emotion, from the day of his arrival; he had recognized so quickly its tremendously historic character. He had seen, in a rapid vision, the guillotine in the middle, on the site of the inscrutable obelisk, and the tumbrils, with waiting victims, were stationed round the circle now made by the majestic monuments of the cities of France. The great legend of the French Revolution, sanguinary and heroic, was more real to him here than anywhere else; and, strangely, what was most present was not its turpitude and horror, but its magnificent energy, the spirit of life that had been in it, not the spirit of death. That shadow was effaced by the modern fairness of fountain and statue, the stately perspective and composition; and as he lingered, before crossing the Seine, a sudden sense overtook him, making his heart sink with a kind of desolation — a sense of everything that might hold one to the world, of the sweetness of not dying, the fascination of great cities, the charm of travel and discovery, the generosity of admiration. The tears rose to his eyes, as they had done more than once in the past six months, and a question, low but poignant, broke from his lips, ending in nothing: "How could he — how could he" — It may be explained that "he" was a reference to Paul Muniment; for Hyacinth had dreamed of the religion of friendship. Three weeks after this he found himself in Venice, whence he addressed to the Princess Casamassima a letter, of which I reproduce the principal passages: —

"This is probably the last time I shall write to you before I return to London. Of course you have been in this place, and you will easily understand why here, especially here, the spirit should move me. Dear Princess, what an enchanted city, what ineffable impressions, what a revelation of the exquisite! I have a room in a little campo opposite to a small old church, which has cracked marble slabs let into the front, and in the cracks grow little wild, delicate flowers, of which I don't know the name. Over the door of the church hangs an old battered leather curtain, polished and tawny, as thick as a mattress, and with buttons in it, like a sofa; and it

flops to and fro, laboriously, as women and girls, with shawls on their heads and their feet in little wooden shoes which have nothing but toes, pass in and out. In the middle of the campo is a fountain, which looks still older than the church; it has a primitive, barbaric air, and I have an idea it was put there by the first settlers — those who came to Venice from the mainland, from Aquileia. Observe how much historical information I have already absorbed; it won't surprise you, however, for you never wondered at anything after you discovered I knew something of Schopenhauer. I assure you, I don't think of that musty misogynist in the least today, for I bend a genial glance on the women and girls I just spoke of, as they glide, with a small clatter, and with their old copper water-jars, to the fountain. The Venetian girl - face is wonderfully sweet, and the effect is charming when its pale, sad oval (they all look underfed) is framed in the old faded shawl. They also have very fascinating hair, which never has done curling, and they slip along together, in couples or threes, interlinked by the arms, and never meeting one's eye (so that its geniality doesn't matter), dressed in thin, cheap cotton gowns, whose limp folds make the same delightful line that everything else in Italy makes. The weather is splendid, and I roast — but I like it; apparently, I was made to be spitted and 'done,' and I discover that I have been cold all my life, even when I thought I was warm. I have seen none of the beautiful patricians who sat for the great painters — the gorgeous beings whose golden hair was intertwined with pearls; but I am studying Italian in order to talk with the shuffling, clicking maidens who work in the bead-factories — I am determined to make one or two of them look at me. When they have filled their old water-pots at the fountain, it is jolly to see them perch them on their heads and patter away over the polished Venetian stones. It's a charm to be in a country where the women don't wear the hideous British bonnet. Even in my own class (excuse the expression — I remember it used to offend you), I have never known a young female, in London, to put her nose out of the door without it: and if you had frequented such young females as much as I have you would have learned of what degradation that dreary necessity is the source. The floor of my room is composed of little brick tiles, and to freshen the air, in this temperature, one sprinkles it, as you no doubt know, with water. Before long, if I keep on sprinkling, I shall be able to swim about; the green shutters are closed, and the place makes a very good tank. Through the chinks the hot light of the campo comes in. I smoke cigarettes, and in the pauses of this composition recline on a faded magenta divan in the corner. Convenient to my hand, in that attitude, are the works of Leopardi and a second-hand dictionary. I am very happy — happier than I have ever been in my life save at Medley — and I don't care for anything but the present hour. It won't last long, for I am spending all my money. When I have finished this, I shall go forth and wander about in the splendid Venetian afternoon; and I shall spend the evening in that enchanted square of St. Mark's, which resembles an immense open-air drawingroom, listening to music, and feeling the sea-breeze blow in between those two strange old columns, in the piazzetta, which seem to make a portal for it. I can scarcely believe that it's of myself that I am telling these fine things; I say to myself a dozen times a day that Hyacinth Robinson is not in it, and pinch my leg, to see if I'm not dreaming. But a short time hence, when I have resumed the exercise of my profession, in sweet Soho, I shall have proof enough that it has been nay very self: I shall know that by the terrible grind I shall feel my work to be.

"That will mean, no doubt, that I'm profoundly demoralized. It won't be for you, however, in this case, to cast the stone at me; for my demoralization began from the moment I first approached you. Dear Princess, I may have done you good, but you haven't done me much. I trust you will understand what I mean by that speech, and not think it flippant or impertinent. I may have helped you to understand and enter into the misery of the people (though, I protest, I don't know much about it), but you have led my imagination into quite another train. However, I don't mean to pretend that it's all your fault, if I have lost sight of the sacred cause almost altogether in my recent adventures. It is not that it has not been there to see, for that, perhaps, is the clearest result of extending one's horizon — the sense, increasing as we go, that want and toil and suffering are the constant lot of the immense majority of the human race. I have found them everywhere, but I haven't minded them. Excuse the cynical confession. What has struck me is the great achievements of which man has been capable in spite of them — the splendid accumulations of the happier few, to which, doubtless, the miserable many have also in their degree contributed. The face of Europe appears to be covered with them, and they have had much the greater part of my attention. They seem to me inestimably precious and beautiful, and I have become conscious, more than ever before, of how little I understand what, in the great rectification, you and Poupin propose to do with them. Dear Princess, there are things which I shall be sorry to see you touch, even you with your hands divine; and — shall I tell you le fond de ma pensee, as you used to say? — I feel myself capable of fighting for them. You can't call me a traitor, for you know the obligation that I recognize. The monuments and treasures of art, the great palaces and properties, the conquests of learning and taste, the general fabric of civilization as we know it, based, if you will, upon all the despotisms, the cruelties, the exclusions, the monopolies, and the rapacities of the past, but thanks to which, all the same, the world is less impracticable and life more tolerable — our friend Hoffendahl seems to me to hold them too cheap, and to wish to substitute for them something in which I can't, somehow, believe as I do in things with which the aspirations and the tears of generations have been mixed. You know how extraordinary I think our Hoffendahl (to speak only of him); but if there is one thing that is more clear about him than another, it is that he wouldn't have the least feeling for this incomparable, abominable old Venice. He would cut up the ceilings of the Veronese into strips, so that every one might have a little piece. I don't want every one to have a little piece of anything, and I have a great horror of that kind of invidious jealousy which is at the bottom of the

idea of a redistribution. You will say that I talk of it at my ease, while, in a delicious capital, I smoke cigarettes on a magenta divan; and I give you leave to scoff at me if it turns out that, when I come back to London without a penny in my pocket, I don't hold the same language. I don't know what it comes from, but during the last three months there has crept over me a deep mistrust of that same grudging attitude — the intolerance of positions and fortunes that are higher and brighter than one's own; a fear, moreover, that I may, in the past, have been actuated by such motives, and a devout hope that if I am to pass away while I am yet young it may not be with that odious stain upon my soul."

Chapter XXXI

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HYACINTH SPENT THREE days, after his return to London, in a process which he supposed to be the quest of a lodging; but in reality he was pulling himself together for the business of his livelihood — an effort he found by no means easy or agreeable. As he had told the Princess, he was demoralized, and the perspective of Mr. Crookenden's dirty staircase had never seemed so steep. He lingered on the brink, before he plunged again into Soho; he wished not to go back to the shop till he should be settled, and he delayed to get settled in order not to go back to the shop. He saw no one during this interval, not even Mr. Vetch; he waited to call upon the fiddler till he should have the appearance of not coming as a beggar or a borrower — have recovered his employment and be able to give an address, as he had heard Captain Sholto say. He went to South Street — not meaning to go in at once, but wishing to look at the house — and there he had the surprise of perceiving a bill of sale in the window of the Princess's late residence. He had not expected to find her in town (he had heard from her the last time three weeks before, and then she said nothing about her prospects), but he was puzzled by this indication that she had moved away altogether. There was something in this, however, which he felt that, at bottom, he had looked for; it appeared a proof of the justice of a certain suspicious, uneasy sentiment from which one could never be quite free, in one's intercourse with the Princess — a vague apprehension that one might suddenly stretch out one's hand and miss her altogether from one's side. Hyacinth decided to ring at the door and ask for news of her; but there was no response to his summons: the stillness of an August afternoon (the year had come round again from his first visit) hung over the place, the blinds were down, and the caretaker appeared to be absent. Under these circumstances Hyacinth was much at a loss; unless, indeed, he should address a letter to his wonderful friend at Medley. It would doubtless be forwarded, though her short lease of the country-house had terminated, as he knew, several weeks before. Captain Sholto was of course a possible medium of communication: but nothing would have induced Hyacinth to ask such a service of him.

He turned away from South Street with a curious sinking of the heart; his state of ignorance struck inward, as it were — had the force of a vague, disquieting portent. He went to old Crookenden's only when he had arrived at his last penny. This, however, was very promptly the case. He had disembarked at London Bridge with only seventeen pence in his pocket, and he had lived on that sum for three days. The old fiddler in Lomax Place was having a chop before he went to the theatre, and he invited Hyacinth to share his repast, sending out at the same time for another pot of beer. He took the youth with him to the play, where, as at that season there were very few spectators, he had no difficulty in finding him a place. He seemed to wish to keep hold of him, and looked at him, strangely, over his spectacles (Mr. Vetch wore the homely double glass, in these latter years), when he learned that Hyacinth had taken a lodging, not in their old, familiar quarter, but in the unexplored portions of Westminster. "What had. determined our young man was the fact that from this part of the town the journey was comparatively a short one to South Lambeth; he had suffered so much, before Pinnie's death, from being separated by such a distance from his best friends. There was a pang in his heart connected with the image of Paul Muniment, but, none the less, the prospect of an evening hour in Audley Court, from time to time, appeared one of his most definite sources of satisfaction in the future. He could have gone straight to South Lambeth to live, but that would carry him too far from the scene of his daily labor; and in Westminster he was much nearer to old Crookenden's than he had been in Lomax Place. He said to Mr. Vetch that if it would give him pleasure he would abandon his lodging, and take another in Pentonville. But the old man replied, after a moment, that he should be sorry to put that constraint upon him; if he were to make such an exaction, Hyacinth would think he wanted to watch him.

"How do you mean, to watch me?"

Mr. Vetch had begun to tune his fiddle, and he scraped it a little before answering. "I mean it as I have always meant it. Surely yon know that in Lomax Place I had my eyes on you. I watched you as a child on the edge of a pond watches the little boat he has constructed and set afloat."

"You couldn't discover much. You saw, after all, very little of me," Hyacinth said.

"I made what I could of that little; it was better than nothing."

Hyacinth laid his hand gently on the old man's arm; he had never felt so kindly to him, not even when he accepted the thirty pounds, before going abroad, as at this moment. "Certainly I will come and see you."

"I was much obliged to you for your letters," Mr. Vetch remarked, without heeding these words, and

continuing to scrape. He had always, even into the shabbiness of his old age, kept that mark of English good-breeding (which is composed of some such odd elements), that there was a shyness, an aversion to possible phrase-making, in his manner of expressing gratitude for favors, and that in spite of this cursory tone his acknowledgment had ever the accent of sincerity.

Hyacinth took but little interest in the play, which was an inanimate revival; he had been at the Theatre Francais, and the tradition of that house was still sufficiently present to him to make any other style of interpretation appear of the clumsiest. He sat in one of the front stalls, close to the orchestra; and while the piece went forward — or backward, ever backward, as it seemed to him — his thoughts wandered far from the shabby scene and the dusty boards, revolving round a question which had come up immensely during the last few hours. The Princess was a capricciosa — that, at least, was Madame Grandoni's account of her; and was that blank, expressionless house in South Street a sign that an end had come to the particular caprice in which he had happened to be involved? He had returned to London with an ache of eagerness to be with her again on the same terms as at Medley, a throbbing sense that unless she had been abominably dishonest he might count upon her. This state of mind was by no means complete security, but it was so sweet that it mattered little whether it were sound. Circumstances had favored in an extraordinary degree his visit to her, and it was by no means clear that they would again be so accommodating, or that what had been possible for a few days should be possible with continuity, in the midst of the ceremonies and complications of London. Hyacinth felt poorer than he had ever felt before, inasmuch as he had had money and spent it, whereas in previous times he had never had it to spend. He never for an instant regretted his squandered fortune, for he said to himself that he had made a good bargain, and become master of a precious equivalent. The equivalent was a rich experience — an experience which would become richer still, as he should talk it over, in a low chair, close to hers, with the all-comprehending, all - suggesting lady of his life. His poverty would be no obstacle to their intercourse, as long as he should have a pair of legs to carry him to her door; for she liked him better shabby than when he was furbished up, and she had given him too many pledges, they had taken together too many appointments, worked out too many programmes, to be disconcerted (on either side) by obstacles that were merely a part of the general conventionality. He was to go with her into the slums, to introduce her to the worst that London contained (he should have, precisely, to make acquaintance with it first), to show her the reality of the horrors of which she dreamed that the world might be purged. He had ceased, himself, to care for the slums, and had reasons for not wishing to spend his remnant in the contemplation of foul things; but he would go through with his part of the engagement. He might be perfunctory, but any dreariness would have a gilding that should involve an association with her. What if she should have changed, and ceased to care? What if, from a kind of royal insolence which he suspected to lurk somewhere in the side scenes of her nature, though he had really not once seen it peep out, she should toss back her perfect head with a movement signifying that he was too basely literal, and that she knew him no more? Hyacinth's imagination represented her this evening in places where a barrier of dazzling light shut her out from access, or even from any appeal. He saw her with other people, in splendid rooms, where "the dukes" had possession of her, smiling, satisfied, surrounded, covered with jewels. When this vision grew intense he found a reassurance in reflecting that after all she would be unlikely to throw him, personally, over so long as she should remain mixed up with what was being planned in the dark, and that it would not be easy for her to liberate herself from that entanglement. She had told him more, of course, at Medley of the manner in which she had already committed herself, and he remembered, with a strange, perverse elation, that she had gone very far indeed.

In the intervals of the foolish play, Mr. Vetch, who lingered in his place in the orchestra while his mates descended into the little hole under the stage, leaned over the rail and asked his young friend occasional questions, carrying his eyes at the same time up about the dingy house, at whose smoky ceiling and tarnished galleries he had been staring for so many a year. He came back to Hyacinth's letters, and said, "Of course you know they were clever; they entertained me immensely. But as I read them I thought of poor Pinnie: I wished she could have listened to them; they would have made her so happy."

"Yes, poor Pinnie," Hyacinth murmured, while Mr. Vetch went on: —

"I was in Paris in 1840; I stayed at a small hotel in the Rue Mogador. I judge everything is changed, from your letters. Does the Rue Mogador still exist? Yes, everything is changed. I dare say it's all much finer, but I liked it very much as it was then. At all events, I am right in supposing — am I not? — that it cheered you up considerably, made you really happy."

"Why should I have wanted any cheering? I was happy enough," Hyacinth replied.

The fiddler turned his old white face upon him; it had the unhealthy smoothness which denotes a sedentary occupation, thirty years spent in a close crowd, amid the smoke of lamps and the odor of stage-paint. "I thought you were sad about Pinnie," he remarked.

"When I jumped, with that avidity, at your proposal that I should take a tour? Poor old Pinnie!" Hyacinth added.

"Well, I hope you think a little better of the world. We mustn't make up our mind too early in life."

"Oh, I have made up mine: it's an awfully jolly place."

"Awfully jolly, no; but I like it as I like an old pair of shoes — I like so much less the idea of putting on the new ones."

"Why should I complain?" Hyacinth asked. "What have I known but kindness? People have done such a lot

for me."

"Oh, well, of course they've liked you. But that's all right," murmured Mr. Vetch, beginning to scrape again. What remained in Hyacinth's mind from this conversation was the fact that the old man, whom he regarded, distinctly, as cultivated, had thought his letters clever. He only wished that he had made them cleverer still; he had no doubt of his ability to have done so.

It may be imagined whether the first hours he spent at old Crookenden's, after he took up work again, were altogether to his taste, and what was the nature of the reception given him by his former comrades, whom he found in exactly the same attitudes and the same clothes (he knew and hated every article they wore), and with the same primitive pleasantries on their lips. Our young man's feelings were mingled; the' place and the people appeared to him loathsome, but there was something delightful in handling his tools. He gave a little private groan of relief when he discovered that he still liked his work, and that the pleasant swarm of his ideas (in the matter of sides and backs) returned to him. They came in still brighter, more suggestive form, and he had the satisfaction of feeling that his taste had improved, that it had been purified by experience, and that the covers of a book might be made to express an astonishing number of high conceptions. Strange enough it was, and a proof, surely, of our little hero's being a genuine artist, that the impressions he had accumulated during the last few months appeared to mingle and confound themselves with the very sources of his craft, and to be susceptible of technical representation. He had quite determined, by this time, to carry on his life as if nothing were hanging over him, and he had no intention of remaining a little bookbinder to the end of his days; for that medium, after all, would translate only some of his conceptions. Yet his trade was a resource, an undiminished resource, for the present, and he had a particular as well as a general motive in attempting new flights — the prevision of the exquisite work that he was to do, during the coming year, for the Princess, and that it was very definite to him he owed her. When that debt should have been paid and his other arrears made up, he proposed to himself to write something. He was far from having decided, as yet, what it should be; the only point settled was that it should be very remarkable, and should not, at least on the face of it, have anything to do with a fresh deal of the social pack. That was to be his transition — into literature; to bind the book, charming as the process might be, was after all much less fundamental than to write it. It had occurred to Hyacinth more than once that it would be a fine thing to produce a brilliant death-song.

It is not surprising that among such reveries as this he should have been conscious of a narrow range in the tone of his old work-fellows. They had only one idea: that he had come into a thousand pounds, and had gone to spend them, in France, with a regular high one. He was aware, in advance, of the diffusion of this legend, and did his best to allow for it, taking the simplest course, which was not to contradict it, but to catch the ball as it came and toss it still farther, enlarging and embroidering, humorously, until Grugan and Roker and Hotchkin and all the rest, who struck him as not having washed since he left them, seemed really to begin to understand how it was he could have spent such a rare sum in so short a time. The impressiveness of this achievement helped him greatly to slip into his place; he could see that, though the treatment it received was superficially irreverent, the sense that he was very sharp and that the springs of his sharpness were somehow secret gained a good deal of strength from it. Hyacinth was not incapable of being rather pleased that it should be supposed, even by Grugan, Roker, and Hotchkin, that he could get rid of a thousand pounds in less than five months, especially as to his own conscience the fact had altogether yet to be proved. He got off, on the whole, easily enough to feel a little ashamed, and he reflected that the men at Crookenden's, at any rate, showed no symptoms of the social jealousy lying at the bottom of the desire for a fresh deal. This was doubtless an accident, and not inherent in the fact that they were highly skilled workmen (old Crookenden had no others), and therefore sure of constant employment; for it was impossible to be more skilled, in one's own line, than Paul Muniment was, and yet he (though not out of jealousy, of course) went in for the great restitution. What struck him most, after he had got used again to the sense of his apron and bent his back a while over his battered table, was the simple, synthetic patience of the others, who had bent their backs and felt the rub of that dirty drapery all the while he was lounging in the halls of Medley, dawdling through boulevards and museums, and admiring the purity of the Venetian girl-face. With Poupin, to be sure, his relations were special; but the explanations that he owed the sensitive Frenchman were not such as could make him very unhappy, once he had determined to resist as much as possible the friction of his remaining days. There was, moreover, more sorrow than anger in Poupin's face when he learned that his young friend and pupil had failed to cultivate, in Paris, the rich opportunities he had offered him. "You are cooling off, my child; there is something about you! Have you the weakness to flatter yourself that anything has been done, or that humanity suffers a particle less? Enfin, it's between you and your conscience."

"Do you think I want to get out of it?" Hyacinth asked, smiling; Eustache Poupin's phrases about humanity, which used to thrill him so, having grown of late strangely hollow and rococo.

"You owe me no explanations; the conscience of the individual is absolute, except, of course, in those classes in which, from the very nature of the infamies on which they are founded, no conscience can exist. Speak to me, however, of my Paris; she is always divine," Poupin went on; but he showed signs of irritation when Hyacinth began to praise to him the magnificent creations of the arch-fiend of December. In the presence of this picture he was in a terrible dilemma: he was gratified as a Parisian and a patriot, but he was disconcerted as a lover of liberty; it cost him a pang to admit that anything in the sacred city was defective, yet he saw still less his way to concede that it could owe any charm to the despotism which had driven him into

exile. “Ah, yes, it’s very fine, no doubt,” he remarked at last, “but it will be finer still when it’s ours!” — a speech which caused Hyacinth to turn back to his work with a slight feeling of sickness. Everywhere, everywhere, he saw the ulcer of envy — the passion of a party which hung together for the purpose of despoiling another to its advantage. In old Eustace, one of the “pure,” this was particularly sad.

Chapter XXXII

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THE LANDING AT THE TOP of the stairs in Audley Court was always dark; but it seemed darker than ever to Hyacinth while he fumbled for the door-latch, after he had heard Rose Muniment’s penetrating voice bid him come in. During that instant his ear caught the sound — if it could trust itself — of another voice, which prepared him, a little, for the spectacle that offered itself as soon as the door (his attempt to reach the handle, in his sudden agitation, proving fruitless) was opened to him by Paul. His friend stood there, tall and hospitable, saying something loud and jovial, which he didn’t distinguish. His eyes had crossed the threshold in a flash, but his step faltered a moment, only to obey, however, the vigor of Muniment’s outstretched hand. Hyacinth’s glance had gone straight, and though with four persons in it Rosy’s little apartment looked crowded, he saw no one but the object of his quick preconception — no one but the Princess Casamassima, seated beside the low sofa (the grand feature, introduced during his absence from London), on which, arrayed in the famous pink dressing - gown, Miss Muniment now received her visitors. He wondered afterwards why he should have been so startled; for he had said, often enough, both to himself and to the Princess, that so far as she was concerned he was proof against astonishment; it was so evident that, in her behavior, the unexpected was the only thing to be looked far. In fact, now that he perceived she had made her way to South Lambeth without his assistance, the feeling that took possession of him was a kind of embarrassment; he blushed a little as he entered the circle, the fourth member of which was, inevitably, Lady Aurora Langrish. Was it that his intimacy with the Princess gave him a certain sense of responsibility for her conduct, in respect to people who knew her, as yet, but a little, and that there was something that required explanation in the confidence with which she had practiced a descent upon them? It is true that it came over our young man that by this time, perhaps, they knew her a good deal; and, moreover, a woman’s conduct spoke for itself when she could sit looking in that fashion, like a radiant angel, dressed in a simple bonnet and mantle, and immensely interested in an appealing corner of the earth. It took Hyacinth but an instant to perceive that her character was in a different phase from any that had yet been exhibited to him. There had been a brilliant mildness about her the night he made her acquaintance, and she had never ceased, at any moment since, to strike him as an exquisitely human, sentient, pitying organization; unless it might be, indeed, in relation to her husband, against whom — for reasons, after all, doubtless, very sufficient — her heart appeared absolutely steeled. But now her face looked at him through a sort of glorious charity. She had put off her splendor, but her beauty was unquenchably bright; she had made herself humble for her pious excursion; she had, beside Rosy (who, in the pink dressing-gown, looked much the more luxurious of the two), almost the attitude of a hospital nurse; and it was easy to see, from the meagre line of her garments, that she was tremendously in earnest. If Hyacinth was flurried, her own countenance expressed no confusion; for her, evidently, this queer little chamber of poverty and pain was a place in which it was perfectly natural that he should turn up. The sweet, still greeting her eyes offered him might almost have conveyed to him that she had been waiting for him, that she knew he would come, and that there had been a tacit appointment for that very moment. They said other things beside, in their beautiful friendliness: they said, “Don’t notice me too much, or make any kind of scene. I have an imnmense deal to say to you, but remember that I have the rest of our life before me to say it in. Consider only what will be easiest and kindest to these people, these delightful people, whom I find enchanting (why didn’t you ever tell me more — I mean really more — about them?); that it won’t be particularly complimentary to them if you have the air of seeing a miracle in my presence here. I am very glad of your return. The quavering, fidgety ‘ladyship’ is as fascinating as the others.”

Hyacinth’s reception at the hands of his old friends was cordial enough quite to obliterate the element of irony that had lurked, three months before, in their godspeed; their welcome was not boisterous, but it seemed to express the idea that the occasion was already so rare and agreeable that his arrival was all that was needed to make it perfect. By the time he had been three minutes in the room he was able to measure the impression produced by the Princess, who, it was clear, had thrown a spell of adoration over the little company. This was in the air, in the face of each, in their excited, smiling eyes arid heightened color; even Rosy’s wan grimace, which was at all times screwed up to ecstasy, emitted a supererogatory ray. Lady Aurora looked more than ever disheveled with interest and wonder; the long strands of her silky hair floated like gossamer, as, in her extraordinary, religious attention (her hands were clasped in her lap, as if she were praying), her respiration rose and fell. She had never seen any one like the Princess; but Hyacinth’s apprehension, of some months before, had been groundless — she evidently didn’t think her vulgar. She thought her divine, and a revelation of beauty and benignity; and the illuminated, amplified room could contain no dissentient opinion. It was her beauty, primarily, that “fetched” them, Hyacinth could easily see, and it was not hidden from him that the

sensation was as active in Paul Muniment as in his companions. It was not in Paul's nature to be jerkily demonstrative, and he had not lost his head on the present occasion; but he had already appreciated the difference between one's preconception of a meretricious, factitious fine lady and the actual influence of such a personage. She was gentler, fairer, wiser, than a chemist's assistant could have guessed in advance. In short, she held the trio in her hand (she had reduced Lady Aurora to exactly the same simplicity as the others), and she performed, admirably, artistically, for their benefit. Almost before Hyacinth had had time to wonder how she had found the Muniments "out (he had no recollection of giving her specific directions), she mentioned that Captain Sholto had been so good as to introduce her; doing so as if she owed him that explanation, and were a woman who would be scrupulous in such a case. It was rather a blow to him to hear that she had been accepting the captain's mediation, and this was not softened by her saying that she was too impatient to wait for his own return; he was apparently so happy on the Continent that one couldn't be sure it would ever take place. The Princess might at least have been sure that to see her again very soon was still more necessary to his happiness than anything the Continent could offer.

It came out in the conversation he had with her, to which the others listened with respectful curiosity, that Captain Sholto had brought her a week before, but then she had seen only Miss Muniment. "I took the liberty of coming again, by myself, to-day, because I wanted to see the whole family," the Princess remarked, looking from Paul to Lady Aurora, with a friendly gayety in her face which purified the observation (as regarded her ladyship) of impertinence. The Princess added, frankly, that she had now been careful to arrive at an hour when she thought Mr. Muniment might be at home. "When I come to see gentlemen, I like at least to find them," she continued, and she was so great a lady that there was no small diffidence in her attitude; it was a simple matter for her to call on a chemist's assistant, if she had a reason. Hyacinth could see that the reason had already been brought forward — her immense interest in questions that Mr. Muniment had completely mastered, and in particular their common acquaintance with the extraordinary man whose mission it was to solve them. Hyacinth learned later that she had pronounced the name of Hoffendahl. A part of the lustre in Rosy's eye came, no doubt, from the explanation she had inevitably been moved to make in respect to any sympathy with wicked theories that might be imputed to her; and of course the effect of this intensely individual little protest (such was always its effect), emanating from the sofa and the pink dressing-gown, was to render the Muniment interior still more quaint and original. In that spot Paul always gave the go-by, humorons-ly, to any attempt to draw out his views, and you would have thought, -to hear him, that he allowed himself the reputation of having them only in order to get a "rise" out of his sister, and let their visitors see with what wit and spirit she could repudiate them. This, however, would only be a reason the more for the Princess's following up her scent. She would doubtless not expect to get at the bottom of his ideas in Audley Court; the opportunity would occur, rather, in case of his having the civility (on which surely she might count) to come and talk them over with her in her own house.

Hyacinth mentioned to her the disappointment he had had in South Street, and she replied, "Oh, I have given up that house, and taken quite a different one." But she didn't say where it was, and in spite of her having given him so much the right to expect she would communicate to him a matter so nearly touching them both as a change of address, he felt a great shyness about asking.

Their companions watched them, as if they considered that something rather brilliant, now, would be likely to come off between them; but Hyacinth was too full of regard to the Princess's tacit notification to him that they must not appear too thick, which was after all more flattering than the most pressing inquiries or the most liberal announcements about herself could have been. She never asked him when he had come back; and indeed it was not long before Rose Muniment took that business upon herself. Hyacinth, however, ventured to assure himself whether Madame Grandoni were still with the Princess, and even to remark (when she had replied, "Oh yes, still, still. The great refusal, as Dante calls it, has not yet come off "), "You ought to bring her to see Miss Rosy. She is a person Miss Rosy would particularly appreciate."

"I am sure I should be most happy to receive any friend of the Princess Casamassima," said this young lady, from the sofa; and when the Princess answered that she certainly would not fail to produce Madame Grandoni some day, Hyacinth (though he doubted whether the presentation would really take place) guessed how much she wished her old friend might have heard the strange, 'bedizened little invalid make that speech.

There were only three other seats, for the introduction of the sofa (a question so profoundly studied in advance) had rendered necessary the elimination of certain articles; so that Muniment, on his feet, hovered round the little circle, with his hands in his pockets, laughing freely and sociably, but not looking at the Princess; though, as Hyacinth was sure, he was none the less agitated by her presence.

"You ought to tell us about foreign parts and the grand things you have seen; except that, doubtless, our distinguished visitor knows all about them," Muniment said to Hyacinth. Then he added, "Surely, at any rate, you have seen nothing more worthy of your respect than South Lambeth."

"Is this the worst part?" the Princess asked, looking up with her noble, interested face.

"The worst, madam? What grand ideas you must have! We admire South Lambeth immensely."

"It's my brother's ideas that are grand!" cried Rose Muniment, betraying him conscientiously. "He does want everything changed, no less than you, Princess; though he is more cunning than you, and won't give one a handle where one can take him up. He thinks all this part most objectionable (as if dirty people won't always make everything dirty where they live!). I dare say he thinks there ought to be no dirty people, and it may be

so; only, if every one was clean, where would be the merit? You would get no credit for keeping yourself tidy. At any rate, if it's a question of soap and water, every one can begin by himself. My brother thinks the whole place ought to be as handsome as Brompton."

"Ah, yes, that's where the artists and literary people live, isn't it?" asked the Princess, attentively.

"I have never seen it, but it's very well laid out," Rosy rejoined, with her competent air.

"Oh, I like South Lambeth better than that," said Muniment, hilariously.

The Princess turned to Lady Aurora, and with the air of appealing to her for her opinion gave her a glance which traveled in a flash from the topmost bow of her large, misfitting hat to the crumpled points of her substantial shoes. "I must get you to tell me the truth," she murmured. "I want so much to know London — the real London. It seems so difficult!"

Lady Aurora looked a little frightened, but at the same time gratified, and after a moment she responded, "I believe a great many artists live in St. John's Wood."

"I don't care about the artists!" the Princess exclaimed, shaking her head, slowly, with the sad smile which sometimes made her beauty so inexpressibly touching.

"Not when they have painted you such beautiful pictures?" Rosy demanded. "We know about your pictures — we have admired them so much. Mr. Hyacinth has described to us your precious possessions."

The Princess transferred her smile to Eosy, and rested it on that young lady's shrunken countenance with the same ineffable headshake. "You do me too much honor. I have no possessions."

"Gracious! was it all a make - believe?" Rosy cried, flashing at Hyacinth an eye that was never so eloquent as when it demanded an explanation.

"I have nothing in the world — nothing but the clothes on my back!" the Princess repeated, very gravely, without looking at the young man.

The words struck him as an admonition, so that, though he was much puzzled, he made no attempt, for the moment, to reconcile the contradictions. He only replied, "I meant the things in the house. Of course I didn't know whom they belonged to."

"There are no things in my house now," the Princess went on; and there was a touch of pure, high resignation in the words.

"Laws, I shouldn't like that!" Rose Muniment declared, glancing, with complacency, over her own decorated walls. "Everything here belongs to me."

"I shall bring Madame Grandoni to see you," said the Princess, irrelevantly, but kindly.

"Do you think it's not right to have a lot of things about?" Lady Aurora, with sudden courage, questioned of her distinguished companion, pointing her chin at her, but looking into the upper angle of the room.

"I suppose one must always settle that for one's self. I don't like to be surrounded with objects I don't care for; and I can care only for one thing — that is, for one class of things — at a time. Dear lady," the Princess went on, "I fear I must confess to you that my heart is not in bibelots. When thousands and tens of thousands haven't bread to put in their mouths, I can dispense with tapestry and old china." And her fair face, bent charmingly, conciliatingly, on Lady Aurora, appeared to argue that if she was narrow, at least she was candid.

Hyacinth wondered, rather vulgarly, what strange turn she had taken, and whether this singular picture of her denuded personality were not one of her famous caprices, a whimsical joke, a nervous perversity. Meanwhile, he heard Lady Aurora urge, anxiously, "But don't you think we ought to make the world more beautiful?"

"Doesn't the Princess make it so by the mere fact of her existence?" Hyacinth demanded; his perplexity escaping, in a harmless manner, through this graceful hyperbole. He had observed that, though the lady in question could dispense with old china and tapestry, she could not dispense with a pair of immaculate gloves which fitted her like a charm.

"My people have a mass of things, you know, but I have really nothing myself," said Lady Aurora, as if she owed this assurance to such a representative of suffering humanity.

"The world will be beautiful enough when it becomes good enough," the Princess resumed. "Is there anything so ugly as unjust distinctions, as the privileges of the few contrasted with the degradation of the many? When we want to beautify, we must begin at the right end."

"Surely there are none of us but what have our privileges!" Rose Muniment exclaimed, with eagerness. "What do you say to mine, lying here between two members of the aristocracy, and with Mr. Hyacinth thrown in?"

"You are certainly lucky — with Lady Aurora Langrish. I wish she would come and see me," the Princess murmured, getting up.

"Do go, my lady, and tell me if it's so poor!" Rosy went on, gayly.

"I think there can't be too many pictures and statues and works of art," Hyacinth broke out. "The more the better, whether people are hungry or not. In the way of ameliorating influences, are not those the most definite?"

"A piece of bread and butter is more to the purpose, if your stomach's empty," the Princess declared.

"Robinson has been corrupted by foreign influences," Paul Muniment suggested. "He doesn't care for bread and butter now; he likes French cookery."

"Yes, but I don't get it. And have you sent away the little man, the Italian, with the white cap and apron?"

Hyacinth asked of the Princess.

She hesitated a moment, and then she replied, laughing, and not in the least offended at his question, though it was an attempt to put her in the wrong from which Hyacinth had not been able to refrain, in his astonishment at these ascetic pretensions, “I have sent him away many times.”

Lady Aurora had also got up: she stood there gazing at her beautiful fellow-visitor with a timidity which made her wonder only more apparent. “Your servants must be awfully fond of you,” she said.

“Oh, my servants!” murmured the Princess, as if it were only by a stretch of the meaning of the word that she could be said to enjoy the ministrations of menials. Her manner seemed to imply that she had a charwoman for an hour a day. Hyacinth caught the tone, and determined that since she was going, as it appeared, he would break off his own visit and accompany her. He had flattered himself, at the end of three weeks of Medley, that he knew her in every phase, but here was a field of freshness. She turned to Paul Muniment and put out her hand to him, and while he took it in his own his face was visited by the most beautiful eyes that had ever rested there. “Will you come and see me, one of these days?” she asked, with a voice as sweet and clear as her glance.

Hyacinth waited for Paul’s answer with an emotion that could only be accounted for by his affectionate sympathy, the manner in which he had spoken of him to the Princess and which he wished him to justify, the interest he had in his appearing, completely, the fine fellow he believed him. Muniment neither stammered nor blushed; he held himself straight, and looked back at his interlocutress with an eye almost as admirable as her own. Then, by way of answer, he inquired, “Well, madam, pray what good will it do me?” And the tone of the words was so humorous and kindly, and so instinct with a plain, manly sense, that, though they were not gallant, Hyacinth was not ashamed for him. At the same moment he observed that Lady Aurora was watching their friend, as if she had at least an equal stake in what he might say.

“Ah, none; only me, perhaps, a little.” With this rejoinder, and with a wonderful sweet, indulgent dignity, in which there was none of the stiffness of pride or of resentment, the Princess quitted him and approached Lady Aurora. She asked her if she wouldn’t do her the kindness to come. She should like so much to know her, and she had an idea there was a great deal they might talk about. Lady Aurora said she should be delighted, and the Princess took one of her cards out of her pocket and gave it to the noble spinster. After she had done so, she stood a moment, holding her hand, and remarked, “It has really been such a happiness to me to meet you. Please don’t think it’s very clumsy if I say I do like you so!” Lady Aurora was evidently exceedingly moved and impressed; but Rosy, when the Princess took farewell of her, and the irrepressible invalid had assured her of the pleasure with which she should receive her again, admonished her that in spite of this she could never conscientiously enter into such theories.

“If every one was equal,” she asked, “where would be the gratification I feel in getting a visit from a grandee? That’s what I have often said to her ladyship, and I consider that I’ve kept her in her place a little. No, no; no equality while I’m about the place!”

The company appeared to comprehend that there was a natural fitness in Hyacinth’s seeing the great lady on her way, and accordingly no effort was made to detain him. He guided her, with the help of an attendant illumination from Muniment, down the dusky staircase, and at the door of the house there was a renewed brief leave-taking with the young chemist, who, however, showed no signs of relenting or recanting in respect to the Princess’s invitation. The warm evening had by this time grown thick, and the population of Audley Court appeared to be passing it, for the most part, in the open air. As Hyacinth assisted his companion to thread her way through groups of sprawling, chattering children, gossiping women with bare heads and babies at the breast, and heavily-planted men smoking very bad pipes, it seemed to him that their project of exploring the slums was already in the way of execution. He said nothing till they had gained the outer street, and then, pausing a moment, he inquired how she would be conveyed. Had she a carriage somewhere, or should he try and get a cab?

“A carriage, my dear fellow? For what do you take me? I won’t trouble you about a cab: I walk everywhere now.”

“But if I had not been here?”

“I should have gone alone,” said the Princess, smiling at him through the turbid twilight of South Lambeth.

“And where, please gracious Heaven? I may at least have the honor of accompanying you.”

“Certainly, if you can walk so far.”

“So far as what, dear Princess?”

“As Madeira Crescent, Paddington.”

“Madeira Crescent, Paddington?” Hyacinth stared.

“That’s what I call it when I’m with people with whom I wish to be fine, like you. I have taken a small house there.”

“Then it’s really true that you have given up your beautiful things?”

“I have sold them all, to give to the poor.”

“Ah, Princess!” the young man almost moaned; for the memory of some of her treasures was vivid within him.

She became very grave, even stern, and with an accent of reproach that seemed to show she had been wounded where she was most sensitive, she demanded, “When I said I was willing to make the last sacrifice,

did you then believe I was lying?"

"Haven't you kept anything?" Hyacinth went on, without heeding this challenge.

She looked at him a moment. "I have kept you!" Then she took his arm, and they moved forward. He saw what she had done; she was living in a little ugly, bare, middle-class house and wearing simple gowns; and the energy and good faith of her behavior, with the abruptness of the transformation, took away his breath. "I thought I should please you so much," she added, after they had gone a few steps.

And before he had time to reply, as they came to a part of the street where there were small shops, those of butchers, greengrocers, and pork-pie men, with open fronts, flaring lamps, and humble purchasers, she broke out, joyously, "Ah, this is the way I like to see London!"

Book Fourth

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Chapter XXXIII

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THE HOUSE in Madeira Crescent was a low, stucco-fronted edifice, in a shabby, shallow semicircle, and Hyacinth could see, as they approached it, that the window-place in the parlor (which was on a level with the street-door) was ornamented by a glass case containing stuffed birds and surmounted by an alabaster Cupid. He was sufficiently versed in his London to know that the descent in the scale of the gentility was almost immeasurable for a person who should have moved into that quarter from the neighborhood of Park Lane., The street was not squalid, and it was strictly residential; but it was mean and meagre and fourth-rate, and had in the highest degree that diminutive, paltry, parochial air, that absence of style and elevation, which is the stamp of whole districts of London, and which Hyacinth had already more than once mentally compared with the high-piled, important look of the Parisian perspective. It possessed in combination every quality which should have made it detestable to the Princess; it was almost as bad as Lomax Place. As they stopped before the narrow, ill-painted door, on which the number of the house was marked with a piece of common porcelain, cut in a fanciful shape, it appeared to Hyacinth that he had felt, in their long walk, the touch of the passion which led his companion to divest herself of her superfluities, but that it would take the romantic out of one's heroism to settle one's self in such a mesquin, Philistine row. However, if the Princess had wished to mortify the flesh, she had chosen an effective means of doing so, and of mortifying the spirit as well.

The long light of the gray summer evening was still in the air, and Madeira Crescent wore a soiled, dusty expression. A handorgan droned in front of a neighboring house, and the cart of the local washerwoman, to which a donkey was harnessed, was drawn up opposite. The local children, as well, were dancing on the pavement, to the music of the organ, and the scene was surveyed, from one of the windows, by a gentleman in a dirty dressing-gown, smoking a pipe, who made Hyacinth think of Mr. Micawber. The young man gave the Princess a deep look, before they went into the house, and she smiled, as if she understood everything that was passing in his mind.

The long, circuitous walk with her, from the faraway South of London, had been strange and delightful; it reminded Hyacinth, more queerly than he could have expressed, of some of the rambles he had taken on summer evenings with Millicent Henning. It was impossible to resemble this young lady less than the Princess resembled her, but in her enjoyment of her unwonted situation (she had never before, on a summer's evening, — to the best of Hyacinth's belief, at least, — lost herself in the unfashionable districts on the arm of a seedy artisan) the distinguished personage exhibited certain coincidences with the shopgirl. She stopped, as Millicent had done, to look into the windows of vulgar establishments, and amused herself with picking out abominable objects that she should like to possess; selecting them from a new point of view, that of a reduced fortune and the domestic arrangements of the "lower middle class," deriving extreme diversion from the idea that she now belonged to that body. She was in a state of light, fresh, sociable exhilaration which Hyacinth had hitherto, in the same degree, not seen in her, and before they reached Madeira Crescent it had become clear to him that her present phase was little more than a brilliant tour de force, which he could not imagine her keeping up long, for the simple reason that, after the novelty and strangeness of the affair had passed away, she would not be able to endure the contact of so much that was common and ugly. For the moment, her discoveries in this line diverted her, as all discoveries did, and she pretended to be sounding, in a scientific spirit — that of the social philosopher, the student and critic of manners — the depths of British Philistinism. Hyacinth was struck, more than ever, with the fund of life that was in her, the energy of feeling, the high, free, reckless spirit. These things expressed themselves, as the couple proceeded, in a hundred sallies and droll proposals, kindling the young man's pulses, and making him conscious of the joy with which, in any extravagance, he would bear her company to the death. She appeared to him, at this moment, to be playing with life so audaciously and defiantly that the end of it all would inevitably be some violent catastrophe.

She desired exceedingly that Hyacinth should take her to a music-hall or a coffee-tavern; she even professed a curiosity to see the inside of a public-house. As she still had self-possession enough to remember that if she stayed out beyond a certain hour Madame Grandoni would begin to worry about her, they were obliged to content themselves with the minor "lark," as the Princess was careful to designate their peep into an establishment, glittering with polished pewter and brass, which bore the name of the Happy Land. Hyacinth had feared that she would be nervous after the narrow, befingered door had swung behind her, or that, at all events, she would be disgusted at what she might see and hear in such a place, and would immediately wish to retreat. By good luck, however, there were only two or three convivial spirits in occupancy, and the presence of the softer sex was apparently not so rare as to excite surprise. The softer sex, furthermore, was embodied in a big, hard, red woman, the publican's wife, who looked as if she were in the habit of dealing with all sorts,

and mainly interested in seeing whether even the finest put down their money before they were served. The Princess pretended to “have something,” and to admire the ornamentation of the bar; and when Hyacinth asked her, in a low tone, what disposal they should make, when the great changes came, of such an embarrassing type as that, replied, offhand, “Oh, drown her in a barrel of beer.” She professed, when they came out, to have been immensely interested in the Happy Land, and was not content until Hyacinth had fixed an evening on which they might visit a music-hall together. She talked with him, largely, by fits and starts, about his adventures abroad and his impressions of France and Italy; breaking off, suddenly, with some irrelevant but almost extravagantly appreciative allusion to Rose Muniment and Lady Aurora; then returning with a question as to what he had seen and done, the answer to which, however, in many cases, she was not at pains to wait for. Yet it implied that she had paid considerable attention to what he told her that she should be able to say, towards the end, with that fraternizing frankness which was always touching because it appeared to place her at one’s mercy, to show that she counted on one’s having an equal loyalty, “Well, my dear friend, you have not wasted your time; you know everything, you have missed nothing; there are lots of things you can tell me, and we shall have some famous talks in the winter evenings.” This last reference was apparently to the coming season, and there was something in the tone of quiet friendship with which it was uttered, and which seemed to involve so many delightful things, something that, for Hyacinth, bound them still closer together. To live out of the world with her, that way, lost among the London millions, in a queer little cockneyfied retreat, was a refinement of intimacy, and better even than the splendid chance he had enjoyed at Medley.

They found Madame Grandoni sitting alone in the twilight, very patient and peaceful, and having, after all, it was clear, accepted the situation too completely to fidget at such a trifle as her companion’s not coming home at a ladylike hour. She had placed herself in the back part of the tawdry little drawingroom, which looked into a small, smutty garden, and, from the front window, which was open, the sound of the hurdy-gurdy and the voices of the children, who were romping to its music, came in to her through the summer dusk. The influence 06 London was there, in a kind of mitigated, faraway hum, and for some reason or other, at that moment, the place, to Hyacinth, took on the semblance of the home of an exile — a spot and an hour to be remembered with a throb of fondness, in some danger or sorrow of after years. The old lady never moved from her chair as she saw the Princess come in with the little bookbinder, and her eyes rested on Hyacinth as familiarly as if she had seen him go out with her in the afternoon. The Princess stood before Madame Grandoni a moment, smiling. “I have done a great thing. What do you think I have done?” she asked, as she drew off her gloves.

“God knows! I have ceased to think!” said the old woman, staring up, with her fat, empty hands on the arms of her chair.

“I have come on foot from the far South of London — how many miles? four or five — and I’m not a particle tired.”

“Che forza, che forza!” murmured Madame Grandoni. “She will knock you up, completely,” she added, turning .to Hyacinth with a kind of customary compassion.

“Poor darling, she misses the carriage,” Christina remarked, passing out of the room.

Madame Grandoni followed her with her eyes, and Hyacinth thought he perceived a considerable lassitude, a plaintive bewilderment and hebetement, in the old woman’s face. “Don’t you like to use cabs — I mean hansoms?” he asked, wishing to say something comforting to her.

“It is not true that I miss anything; my life is only too full,” she replied. “I lived worse than this — in my bad days.” In a moment she went on: “It’s because you are here — she doesn’t like Assunta to come.”

“Assunta — because I am here?” Hyacinth did not immediately catch her meaning.

“You must have seen her Italian maid at Medley. She has kept her, and she’s ashamed of it. When we are alone Assunta comes for her bonnet. But she likes you to think she waits on herself.”

“That’s a weakness — when she’s so strong! And what does Assunta think of it?” Hyacinth asked, looking at the stuffed birds in the window, the alabaster Cupid, the wax flowers on the chimneypiece, the florid antimacassars on the chairs, the sentimental engravings on the walls — in frames of papier-mache and “composition,” some of them enveloped in pink tissue-paper — and the prismatic glass pendants which seemed attached to everything.

“She says, ‘What on earth will it matter tomorrow?’”

“Does she mean that tomorrow the Princess will have her luxury back again? Hasn’t she sold all her beautiful things?”

Madame Grandoni was silent a moment. “She has kept a few. They are put away.”

“A la bonne heure!” cried Hyacinth, laughing. He sat down with the ironical old woman; he spent nearly half an hour in desultory conversation with her, before candles were brought in, and while Christina was in Assunta’s hands. He noticed how resolutely the Princess had withheld herself from any attempt to sweeten the dose she had taken it into her head to swallow, to mitigate the ugliness of her vulgar little house. She had respected its horrible idiosyncrasies, and left, rigidly, in their places the gimcracks which found favor in Madeira Crescent. She had flung no draperies over the pretentious furniture, and disposed no rugs upon the staring carpet; and it was plainly her theory that the right way to acquaint one’s self with the sensations of the wretched was to suffer the anguish of exasperated taste. Presently a female servant came in — not the

Skeptical Assunta, but a stunted young woman of the maid-of-all-work type, the same who had opened the door to the pair a short time before — and informed Hyacinth that the Princess wished him to understand that he was expected to remain to tea. He learned from Madame Grandoni that the custom of an early dinner, followed in the evening by the frugal repast of the lower orders, was another of Christina's mortifications; and when, shortly afterwards, he saw the table laid in the back parlor, which was also the dining-room, and observed the nature of the crockery with which it was decorated, he perceived that whether or no her earnestness were durable, it was at any rate, for the time, intense. Madame Grandoni narrated to him, definitely, as the Princess had done only in scraps, the history of the two ladies since his departure from Medley, their relinquishment of that fine house, and the sudden arrangements Christina had made to change her mode of life, after they had been only ten days in South Street. At the climax of the London season, in a society which only desired to treat her as one of its brightest ornaments, she had retired to Madeira Crescent, concealing her address (with only partial success, of course) from every one, and inviting a celebrated curiosity-monger to come and look at her bibelots, and tell her what he would give her for the lot. In this manner she had parted with them at a fearful sacrifice. She had wished to avoid the nine days' wonder of a public sale; for, to do her justice, though she liked to be original, she didn't like to be notorious, an occasion of vulgar chatter. What had precipitated her determination was a remonstrance received from her husband, just after she left Medley, on the subject of her excessive expenditure; he had written to her that it was past a joke (as she had appeared to consider it), and that she must really pull up. Nothing could gall her more than an interference on that head (she maintained that she knew the exact figure of the Prince's income, and that her allowance was an insignificant part of it), and she had pulled up with a vengeance, as Hyacinth perceived. The young man divined on this occasion one of the Princess's sharpest anxieties (he had never thought of it before), the danger of Casamassima's really putting the screw on — attempting to make her come back and live with him by withholding supplies altogether. In this case she would find herself in a very tight place, though she had a theory that if she should go to law about the matter the courts would allow her a separate maintenance. This course, however, it would scarcely be in her character to adopt; she would be more likely to waive her right, and support herself by lessons in music and the foreign tongues, supplemented by the remnant of property that had come to her from her mother. That she was capable of returning to the Prince some day, through not daring to face the loss of luxury, was an idea that could not occur to Hyacinth, in the midst of her assurances, uttered at various times, that she positively yearned for a sacrifice; and such an apprehension was less present to him than ever as he listened to Madame Grandoni's account of the manner in which her rupture with the fashionable world had been effected. It must be added that the old lady remarked, with a sigh, that she didn't know how it would all end, as some of Christina's economies were very costly; and when Hyacinth pressed her a little, she went on to say that it was not, at present, the question of complications arising from the Prince that troubled her most, but the fear that Christina was seriously compromised by her reckless, senseless correspondences — letters arriving from foreign countries, from God knew whom (Christina never told her, nor did she desire it), all about uprisings and liberations (of so much one could be sure) and other matters that were no concern of honest folks. Hyacinth scarcely knew what Madame Grandoni meant by this allusion, which seemed to show that, during the last few months, the Princess had considerably extended her revolutionary connection: he only thought of Hoffendahl, whose name, however, he was careful not to pronounce, and wondered whether his hostess had been writing to the Master to intercede for him, to beg that he might be let off. His cheeks burned at the thought, but he contented himself with remarking to Madame Grandoni that their extraordinary friend enjoyed the sense of danger. The old lady wished to know how she would enjoy the hangman's rope (with which, du train dont elle allait, she might easily make acquaintance); and when he expressed the hope that she didn't regard him as a counselor of imprudence, replied, "You, my poor child? Oh, I saw into you at Medley. You are a simple codino!"

The Princess came in to tea in a plain white frock, with a bunch of keys at her girdle; and nothing could have suggested the thrifty housewife better than the manner in which she superintended the laying of the cloth and the placing on it of a little austere refreshment — a pile of bread and butter, flanked by a pot of marmalade and a morsel of bacon. She filled the teapot out of a little tin canister locked up in a cupboard, of which the key worked with difficulty, and made the tea with her own superb hands; taking pains, however, to explain to Hyacinth that she was far from imposing that regime on Madame Grandoni, who understood that the grocer had a standing order to supply her, for her private consumption, with any delicacy she might desire. For herself, she had never been so well as since she had followed a homely diet. On Sundays they had muffins, and sometimes, for a change, a kippered herring, or even a fried sole. Hyacinth was lost in adoration of the Princess's housewifely ways and of the exquisite figure that she made as a little bourgeoises judging that if her attempt to combine plain living with high thinking were all a comedy, at least it was the most finished entertainment she had yet offered him. She talked to Madame Grandoni about Lady Aurora: described her with much drollery, even to the details of her dress; declared that she was a delightful creature, and one of the most interesting persons she had seen for an age; expressed to Hyacinth the conviction that she should like her exceedingly, if Lady Aurora would only believe a little in her. "But I shall like her, whether she does or not," said the Princess. "I always know when that's going to happen; it isn't so common. She will begin very well with me, and be 'fascinated' — isn't that the way people begin with me? — but she won't understand me at all, or make out in the least what kind of a queer fish I am, though I shall try to show her. When she thinks she

does, at last, she will give me up in disgust, and will never know that she has understood me quite wrong. That has been the way with most of the people I have liked; they have run away from me a toutes jambes. Oh, I have inspired aversions!" laughed the Princess, handing Hyacinth his cup of tea. He recognized it by the aroma as a mixture not inferior to that of which he had partaken at Medley. "I have never succeeded in knowing any one who would do me good; for by the time I began to improve, under their influence, they could put up with me no longer."

"You told me you were going to visit the poor. I don't understand what your Grafin was doing there," said Madame Grandoni.

"She had come out of charity — in the same way as I. She evidently goes about immensely over there; I shall entreat her to take me with her."

"I thought you had promised to let me be your guide, in those explorations," Hyacinth remarked.

The Princess looked at him a moment. "Dear Mr. Robinson, Lady Aurora knows more than you."

"There have been times, surely, when you have complimented me on my knowledge."

"Oh, I mean more about the lower classes!" the Princess exclaimed; and, oddly enough, there was a sense in which Hyacinth was unable to deny the allegation. He presently returned to something she had said a moment before, declaring that it had not been the way with Madame Grandoni and him to take to their heels, and to this she replied, "Oh, you'll run away yet; don't be afraid!"

"I think that if I had been capable of quitting you I should have done it by this time; I have neglected such opportunities," the old lady sighed. Hyacinth now perceived that her eye had quite lost its ancient twinkle; she was troubled about many things.

"It is true that if you didn't leave me when I was rich, it wouldn't look well for you to leave me at present," the Princess suggested; and before Madame Grandoni could reply to this speech she said to Hyacinth, "I liked the man, your friend Muniment, so much for saying he wouldn't come to see me. 'What good would it do him,' poor fellow? What good would it do him, indeed? You were not so difficult: you held off a little and pleaded obstacles, but one could see you would come down," she continued, covering her guest with her mystifying smile. "Besides, I was smarter then, more splendid; I had on gewgaws and suggested worldly lures. I must have been more attractive. But I liked him for refusing," she repeated; and of the many words she uttered that evening, it was these that made most impression on Hyacinth. He remained for an hour after tea, for on rising from the table she had gone to the piano (she had not deprived herself of this resource, and had a humble instrument, of the so-called "cottage" kind), and begun to play in a manner that reminded him of her playing the day of his arrival at Medley. The night had grown close, and as the piano was in the front room he opened, at her request, the window that looked into Madeira Crescent. Beneath it assembled the youth of both sexes, the dingy loiterers who had clustered an hour before around the hurdy-gurdy. But on this occasion they did not caper about; they remained still, leaning against the area-rails and listening to the wondrous music. When Hyacinth told the Princess of the spell she had thrown upon them she declared that it made her singularly happy; she added that she was really glad, almost proud, of her day; she felt as if she had begun to do something for the people. Just before he took leave, she encountered some occasion for saying to him that she was certain the man in Audley Court wouldn't come; and Hyacinth did not contradict her, because he believed that in fact he wouldn't.

Chapter XXXIV

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HOW RIGHT she had been to say that Lady Aurora would probably be fascinated at first was proved the first time Hyacinth went to Belgrave Square, a visit he was led to pay very promptly, by a deep sense of the obligations under which her ladyship had placed him at the time of Pinnie's death. The circumstances in which he found her were quite the same as those of his visit the year before; she was spending the unfashionable season in her father's empty house, amid a desert of brown hollands and the dormant echoes of heavy conversation. He had seen so much of her during Pinnie's illness that he felt (or had felt then) that he knew her almost intimately — that they had become real friends, almost comrades, and might meet henceforth without reserves or ceremonies; yet she was as fluttered and awkward as she had been on the other occasion — not distant, but enmeshed in a new growth of shyness, and apparently unmindful of what had happened to draw them closer. Hyacinth, however, always liked extremely to be with her, for she was the person in the world who quietly, delicately, and as a matter of course treated him most like a gentleman. She had never said the handsome, flattering things to him that had fallen from the lips of the Princess, and never explained to him her view of him; but her timid, cursory, receptive manner, which took all sorts of equalities for granted, was a homage to the idea of his refinement. It was in this manner that she now conversed with him on the subject of his foreign travels; he found himself discussing the political indications of Paris and the Ruskiuian theories of Venice, in Belgrave Square, quite like one of the cosmopolites bred in that region. It took him, however, but a few minutes to perceive that Lady Aurora's heart was not in these considerations; the deferential smile she bent upon him, while she sat with her head thrust forward and her long hands clasped in her lap, was slightly

mechanical, her attitude perfunctory. When he gave her his views of some of the arriere-pensees of Napoleon III. (for he had views not altogether, as he thought, deficient in originality), she did not interrupt, for she never interrupted; but she took advantage of his first pause to say, quickly, irrelevantly, “Will the Princess Casamassima come again to Audley Court?”

“I have no doubt she will come again, if they would like her to.”

“I do hope she will. She is very wonderful,” Lady Aurora continued.

“Oh, yes, she is very wonderful. I think she gave Rosy pleasure,” said Hyacinth.

“Rosy can talk of nothing else. It would really do her great good to see the Princess again. Don’t you think she is different from anybody that one has ever seen?” But her ladyship added, before waiting for an answer to this, “I liked her quite extraordinarily.”

“She liked you just as much. I know it would give her great pleasure if you should go to see her.”

“Fancy!” exclaimed Lady Aurora; but she instantly obtained the Princess’s address from Hyacinth, and made a note of it in a small, shabby book. Then she said, hesitating a little, “Does she really care for the poor?”

“If she doesn’t,” the young man replied, “I can’t imagine what interest she has in pretending to.”

“If she does, she’s very remarkable — she deserves great honor.”

“You really care; why is she more remarkable than you?” Hyacinth demanded.

“Oh, it’s very different — she’s so wonderfully attractive!” Lady Aurora replied, making, recklessly, the only allusion to the oddity of her own appearance in which Hyacinth was destined to hear her indulge. She became conscious of it the moment she had spoken, and said, quickly, to turn it off, “I should like to talk with her, but I’m rather afraid. She’s tremendously clever.”

“Ah, what she is you’ll find out when you know her!” Hyacinth sighed, expressively.

His hostess looked at him a little, and then, vaguely, exclaimed, “Fancy!” again. The next moment she continued, “She might do so many other things; she might charm the world.”

“She does that, whatever she does,” said Hyacinth, smiling. “It’s all by the way; it needn’t interfere.”

“That’s what I mean, that most other people would be content — beautiful as she is. There’s merit, when you give up something.”

“She has known a great many bad people, and she wants to know some good,” Hyacinth rejoined. “Therefore be sure to go to her soon.”

“She looks as if she had known nothing bad since she was born,” said Lady Aurora, blinking candidly. “I can’t imagine her going into all the dreadful places that she would have to.”

“You have gone into them, and it hasn’t hurt you,” Hyacinth suggested.

“How do you know that? My family think it has.”

“You make me glad that I haven’t a family,” said the young man.

“And the Princess — has she no one?”

“Ah, yes, she has a husband. But she doesn’t live with him.”

“Is he one of the bad persons?” asked Lady Aurora, as earnestly as a child listening to a tale.

“Well, I don’t like to abuse him, because he is down.”

“If I were a man, I should be in love with her,” said Lady Aurora. Then she pursued, “I wonder whether we might work together.”

“That’s exactly what she hopes.”

“I won’t show her the worst places,” said her ladyship, smiling.

To which Hyacinth replied, “I suspect you will do what every one else has done, namely, exactly what she wants!” Before he took leave he said to her, “Do you know whether Paul Muniment liked the Princess?”

Lady Aurora considered a moment, apparently with some intensity. “I think he considered her extraordinarily beautiful — the most beautiful person he had ever seen.”

“Does he still believe her to be a humbug?”

“Still?” asked Lady Aurora, as if she didn’t understand.

“I mean that that was the impression apparently made upon him last winter by my description of her.”

“Oh, I’m sure he thinks her immensely clever!” That was all the satisfaction Hyacinth got just then as to Muniment’s estimate of the Princess.

A few days afterward he returned to Madeira Crescent, in the evening, the only time he was free, the Princess having given him a general invitation to take tea with -her. He felt that he ought to be discreet in acting upon it, though he was not without reasons that would have warranted him in going early and often. He had a peculiar dread of her growing tired of him — boring herself in his society; yet at the same time he had rather a sharp vision of her boring herself without him, in the dull summer evenings, when even Notting Hill was out of town. He wondered what she did, what visitors dropped in, what pastimes she cultivated, what saved her from the sudden vagary of throwing up the whole of her present game. He remembered that there was a complete side of her life with which he was almost unacquainted (Lady Marchant and her daughters, at Medley, and three or four other persons who had called while he was there, being, in his experience, the only illustrations of it), and knew not to what extent she had, in spite of her transformation, preserved relations with her old friends; but he could easily imagine a day when she should discover that what she found in Madeira Crescent was less striking than what she missed. Going thither a second time, Hyacinth perceived that he had done her great injustice; she was full of resources; she had never been so happy; she found time to read,

to write, to commune with her piano, and above all to think — a delightful detachment from the invasive, vulgar, gossiping, distracting world she had known hitherto. The only interruption to her felicity was that she received quantities of notes from her former acquaintance, challenging her to give some account of herself, to say what had become of her, to come and stay with them in the country; but with these importunate missives she took a very short way — she simply burned them, without answering. She told Hyacinth immediately that Lady Aurora had called on her, two days before, at an hour when she was not in, and she had straightway addressed her, in return, an invitation to come to tea, any evening, at eight o'clock. That was the way the people in Madeira Crescent entertained each other (the Princess knew everything about them now, and was eager to impart her knowledge); and the evening, she was sure, would be much more convenient to Lady Aurora, whose days were filled with good works, peregrinations of charity. Her ladyship arrived ten minutes after Hyacinth; she told the Princess that her invitation had been expressed in a manner so irresistible that she was unwilling to wait more than a day to respond. She was introduced to Madame Grandoni, and tea was immediately served; Hyacinth being gratefully conscious the while of the kindly way in which Lady Aurora forbore to appear bewildered at meeting him in such society. She knew he frequented it, and she had been witness of his encounter with the Princess in Audley Court; but it might have starred her to have ocular evidence of the footing on which he stood. Everything the Princess did or said, at this time, had for effect, whatever its purpose, to make her seem more rare and fine; and she had seldom given him greater pleasure than by the exquisite art she put forward to win Lady Aurora's confidence, to place herself under the pure and elevating influence of the noble spinster. She made herself small and simple; she spoke of her own little aspirations and efforts; she appealed and persuaded; she laid her white hand on Lady Aurora's, and gazed at her with an interest which was evidently deeply sincere, but which, all the same, derived half its effect from the contrast between the quality of her beauty, the whole air of her person, and the hard, dreary problems of misery and crime. It was touching, and Lady Aurora was touched; that was very evident as they sat together on the sofa, after tea, and the Princess protested that she only wanted to know what her new friend was doing — what she had done for years — in order that she might go and do likewise. She asked personal questions with a directness that was sometimes embarrassing to the subject — Hyacinth had seen that habit in her from the first — and Lady Aurora, though she was charmed and excited, was not quite comfortable at being so publicly probed and sounded. The public was formed of Madame Grandoni and Hyacinth; but the old lady (whose intercourse with the visitor had consisted almost wholly of watching her with a quiet, speculative anxiety) presently shuffled away, and was heard, through the thin partitions that prevailed in Madeira Crescent, to ascend to her own apartment. It seemed to Hyacinth that he ought also, in delicacy, to retire, and this was his intention, from one moment to the other; to him, certainly (and the second time she met him), Lady Aurora had made as much of her confession as he had a right to look for. After that one little flash of egotism he had never again heard her allude to her own feelings or circumstances.

"Do you stay in town, like this, at such a season, on purpose to attend to your work?" the Princess asked; and there was something archly rueful in the tone in which she made this inquiry, as if it cost her just a pang to find that in taking such a line she herself had not been so original as she hoped. "Mr. Robinson has told me about your big house in Belgrave Square — you must let me come and see you there. Nothing would make me so happy as that you should allow me to help you a little — how little soever. Do you like to be helped, or do you like to go alone? Are you very independent, or do you need to look up, to cling, to lean upon some one? Excuse me if I ask impertinent questions; we speak that way — rather, you know — in Rome, where I have spent a large part of my life. That idea of your being there alone in your great dull house, with all your charities and devotions, makes a kind of picture in my mind; it's quaint and touching, like something in some English novel. Englishwomen are so accomplished, are they not? I am really a foreigner, you know, and though I have lived here a while it takes one some time to find those things out au juste. Therefore, is your work for the people only one of your occupations, or is it everything, does it absorb your whole life? That's what I should like it to be for me! Do your family like you to throw yourself into all this, or have you had to brave a certain amount of ridicule? I dare say you have; that's where you English are strong, in braving ridicule. They have to do it so often, haven't they? I don't know whether I could do it. I never tried; but with you I would brave anything. Are your family clever and sympathetic? No? the kind of thing that one's family generally is? Ah, well, dear lady, we must make a little family together. Are you encouraged or disgusted? Do you go on doggedly, or have you any faith, any great idea, that lifts you up? Are you religious, now par exemple? Do you do your work in connection with any ecclesiasticism, any priests or sisters? I'm a Catholic — but so little! I shouldn't mind in the least joining hands with any one who is really doing anything. I express myself awkwardly, but perhaps you know what I mean. Possibly you don't know that I am one of those who believe that a great social cataclysm is destined to take place, and that it can't make things worse than they are already. I believe, in a word, in the people doing something for themselves (the others will never do anything for them), and I am quite willing to help them. If that shocks you I shall be immensely disappointed, because there is something in the impression you make on me that seems to say that you haven't the usual prejudices, and that if certain things were to happen you wouldn't be afraid. You are shy, are you not? — but you are not timorous. I suppose that if you thought the inequalities and oppressions and miseries which now exist were a necessary part of life, and were going on forever, you wouldn't be interested in those people over the river (the bedridden girl and her brother, I mean); because Mr. Robinson tells me that they are advanced socialists — or

at least the brother is. Perhaps you'll say that you don't care, for him; the sister, to your mind, being the remarkable one. She is, indeed, a perfect little femme du monde — she talks so much better than most of the people in society. I hope you don't mind my saying that, because I have an idea that you are not in society. You can imagine whether I am! Haven't you judged it, like me, condemned it, and given it up? Are you not sick of the egotism, the snobbery, the meanness, the frivolity, the immorality, the hypocrisy? Isn't there a great resemblance in our situation? I don't mean in our nature, for you are far better than I shall ever be. Aren't you quite divinely good? When I see a woman of your sort (not that I often do!), I try to be a little less bad. You have helped hundreds, thousands, of people; you must help me!"

These remarks, which I have strung together, did not, of course, fall from the Princess's lips in an uninterrupted stream; they were arrested and interspersed by frequent inarticulate responses and embarrassed protests. Lady Aurora shrank from them even while they gratified her, blinking and fidgeting in the brilliant, direct light of her hostess's attentions. I need not repeat her answers, the more so as they none of them arrived at completion, but passed away into nervous laughter and averted looks, the latter directed at the ceiling, the floor, the windows, and appearing to constitute a kind of entreaty to some occult or supernatural power that the conversation should become more impersonal. In reply to the Princess's allusion to the convictions prevailing in the Muniment family, she said that the brother and sister thought differently about public questions, but were of the same mind with regard to persons of the upper class taking an interest in the working people, attempting to enter into their life: they held it was a great mistake. At this information the Princess looked much disappointed; she wished to know if the Muniments thought it was impossible to do them any good. "Oh, I mean a mistake from our point of view," said Lady Aurora. "They wouldn't do it in our place; they think we had much better occupy ourselves with our own pleasures." And as the Princess stared, not comprehending, she went on: "Rosy thinks we have a right to our own pleasures under all circumstances, no matter how badly off the poor may be; and her brother takes the ground that we will not have them long, and that, in view of what may happen, we are great fools not to make the most of them."

"I see, I see. That is very strong," the Princess murmured, in a tone of high appreciation.

"I dare say. But all the same, whatever is going to come, one must do something."

"You do think, then, that something is going to come?" said the Princess.

"Oh, immense changes, I dare say. But I don't belong to anything, you know."

The Princess hesitated a moment. "No more do I. But many people do. Mr. Robinson, for instance." And she gave Hyacinth a familiar smile.

"Oh, if the changes depend on me!" the young man exclaimed, blushing.

"They won't set the Thames on fire — I quite agree to that!"

Lady Aurora had the manner of not considering that she had a warrant for going into the question of Hyacinth's affiliations; so she stared, delicately, at the piano, and in a moment remarked to the Princess, "I am sure you play awfully well; I should like so much to hear you."

Hyacinth felt that their hostess thought this banal. She had not asked Lady Aurora to spend the evening with her simply that they should fall back on the resources of the vulgar. Nevertheless, she replied with perfect goodnature that she should be delighted to play; only there was a thing she should like much better, namely, that Lady Aurora should narrate her life.

"Oh, don't talk about mine; yours, yours!" her ladyship cried, coloring with eagerness, and, for the first time since her arrival, indulging in the free gesture of laying her hand upon that of the Princess.

"With so many narratives in the air, I certainly had better take myself off," said Hyacinth, and the Princess offered no opposition to his departure. She and Lady Aurora were evidently on the point of striking up a tremendous intimacy, and as he turned this idea over, walking away, it made him sad, for strange, vague reasons, which he could not have expressed.

Chapter XXXV

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THE SUNDAY following this occasion Hyacinth spent almost entirely with the Muniments, with whom, since his return to his work, he had been able to have no long, fraternizing talk, of the kind that had marked their earlier relations. The present, however, was a happy day; it refreshed exceedingly the sentiments with which he now regarded the inscrutable Paul. The warm, bright September weather gilden even the dinginess of Audley Court, and while, in the morning, Rosy's brother and their visitor sat beside her sofa, the trio amused themselves with discussing a dozen different plans for giving a festive turn to the day. There had been moments, in the last six months, when Hyacinth had the sense that he should never again be able to enter into such ideas as that, and these moments had been connected with the strange perversion taking place in his mental image of the man whose hardness (of course he was obliged to be hard) he had never expected to see turned upon a passionate admirer. But now, for the hour at least, the darkness had cleared away, and Paul's company was in itself a comfortable, inspiring influence. He had never been kinder, jollier, safer, as it were; it had never appeared more desirable to hold fast to him and trust him. Less than ever would an observer have

guessed there was a reason why the two young men might have winced as they looked at each other. Rosy naturally took part in the question debated between her companions — the question whether they should limit their excursion to a walk in Hyde Park; should embark at Lambeth pier on the penny steamer, which would convey them to Greenwich; or should start presently for Waterloo station, and go thence by train to Hampton Court. Miss Muniment had visited none of these places, but she contributed largely to the discussion, for which she seemed perfectly qualified; talked about the crowd on the steamer, and the inconvenience arising from drunken persons on the return, quite as if she had suffered from these drawbacks; said that the view from the hill at Greenwich was terribly smoky, and at that season the fashionable world — half the attraction, of course — was wholly absent from Hyde Park; and expressed strong views in favor of Wolsey's old palace, with whose history she appeared intimately acquainted. She threw herself into her brother's holiday with eagerness and glee, and Hyacinth marveled again, as he had done before, at the stoicism of the hard, bright little creature, whose imagination appeared never to concern itself with her own privations, so that she could lie in her close little room the whole golden afternoon, without bursting into sobs as she saw the western sunbeams slant upon the shabby, ugly, familiar paper of her wall, and thought of the far-off fields and gardens which she should never see. She talked immensely of the Princess, for whose beauty, grace, and benevolence she could find no sufficient praise; declaring that of all the fair faces that had ever hung over her couch (and Rosy spoke as from immense opportunities for comparison) she had far the noblest and most refreshing. She seemed to make a kind of light in the room, and to leave it behind her after she had gone. Rosy could call up her image as she could hum a tune she had heard, and she expressed in her quaint, particular way how, as she lay there in the quiet hours, she repeated over to herself the beautiful air. The Princess might be anything, she might be royal or imperial, and Rosy was well aware how little she should complain of the dullness of her life when such apparitions as that could pop in any day.

She made a difference in the place — it gave it a kind of finish for her to have come there; if it was good enough for a princess, it was good enough for her, and she hoped she shouldn't hear again of Paul's wishing her to move out of a room with which she should have henceforth such delightful associations. The Princess had found her way to Audley Court, and perhaps she wouldn't find it to another lodging — they couldn't expect her to follow them about London at their pleasure; and at any rate she had evidently been very much struck with the little room, so that, if they were quiet and patient, who could say but the fancy would take her to send them a bit of carpet, or a picture, or even a mirror with a gilt frame, to make it a bit more tasteful? Rosy's transitions from pure enthusiasm to the imaginative calculation of benefit were performed with a serenity peculiar to herself. Her chatter had so much spirit and point that it always commanded attention, but to-day Hyacinth was less patient of it than usual, because, so long as it lasted, Muniment held his tongue, and what he had been anxious about was much more Paul's impression of the Princess. Rosy made no remark to him on the monopoly he had so long enjoyed of this wonderful lady; she had always had the manner of a kind of indulgent incredulity about Hyacinth's social adventures, and he saw the day might easily come when she would begin to talk of the Princess as if she herself had been the first to discover her. She had much to say, however, about the nature of the acquaintance Lady Aurora had formed with her, and she was mainly occupied with the glory she had drawn upon herself by bringing two such exalted persons together. She fancied them alluding, in the great world, to the occasion on which "we first met, at Miss Muniment's, you know;" and she related how Lady Aurora, who had been in Audley Court the day before, had declared that she owed her a debt she could never repay. The two ladies had liked each other more, almost, than they liked any one; and wasn't it a rare picture to think of them moving hand in hand, like twin roses, through the bright upper air? Muniment inquired, in rather a coarse, unsympathetic way, what the mischief she ever wanted of her; which led Hyacinth to demand in return, "What do you mean? What does who want of whom?"

"What does the beauty want of our poor lady? She has a totally different stamp. I don't know much about women, but I can see that."

"How do you mean — a different stamp? They both have the stamp of their rank!" cried Rosy.

"Who can ever tell what women want, at any time?" Hyacinth said, with the offhandedness of a man of the world.

"Well, my boy, if you don't know any more than I, you disappoint me! Perhaps, if we wait long enough, she will tell us some day, herself."

"Tell you what she wants of Lady Aurora?"

"I don't mind about Lady Aurora so much; but what in the name of long journeys does she want with us?"

"Don't you think you 're worth a long journey?" Rosy asked, gayly. "If you were not my brother, which is handy for seeing you, and I were not confined to my sofa, I would go from one end of England to the other to make your acquaintance! He's in love with the Princess," she went on, to Hyacinth, "and he asks those senseless questions to cover it up. What does any one want of anything?"

It was decided, at last, that the two young men should go down to Greenwich, and after they had partaken of" bread and cheese with Rosy they embarked on a penny-steamer. The boat was densely crowded, and they leaned, rather squeezed together, in the fore part of it, against the rail of the deck, and watched the big black fringe of the yellow stream. The river was always fascinating to Hyacinth. The mystified entertainment which, as a child, he had found in all the aspects of London came back to him from the murky scenery of its banks and the sordid agitation of its bosom: the great arches and pillars of the bridges, where the water rushed, and the

funnels tipped, and sounds made an echo, and there seemed an overhanging of interminable processions; the miles of ugly wharves and warehouses; the lean protrusions of chimney, mast, and crane; the painted signs of grimy industries, staring from shore to shore; the strange, flat, obstructive barges, straining and bumping on some business as to which everything was vague but that it was remarkably dirty; the clumsy coasters and colliers, which thickened as one went down; the small, loafing boats, whose occupants, somehow, looking up from their oars at the steamer, as they rocked in the oily undulations of its wake, appeared profane and sarcastic; in short, all the grinding, puffing, smoking, splashing activity of the turbid flood. In the goodnatured crowd, amid the fumes of vile tobacco, beneath the shower of sooty particles, and to the accompaniment of a bagpipe of a dingy Highlander, who sketched occasionally a smothered reel, Hyacinth forbore to speak to his companion of what he had most at heart; but later, as they lay on the brown, crushed grass, on one of the slopes of Greenwich Park, and saw the river stretch away and shine beyond the pompous colonnades of the hospital, he asked him whether there was any truth in what Rosy had said about his being sweet on their friend the Princess. He said “their friend” on purpose, speaking as if, now that she had been twice to Audley Court, Muniment might be regarded as knowing her almost as well as he himself did. He wished to conjure away the idea that he was jealous of Paul, and if he desired information on the point I have mentioned, this was because it still made him almost as uncomfortable as it had done at first that his comrade should take the scoffing view. He didn’t easily see such a fellow as Muniment wheel about from one day to the other, but he had been present at the most exquisite exhibition he had ever observed the Princess make of that divine power of conciliation which was not, perhaps, in social intercourse, the art she chiefly exercised, but was certainly the most wonderful of her secrets, and it would be remarkable indeed that a sane young man should not have been affected by it. It was familiar to Hyacinth that Muniment was not easily touched by women, but this might perfectly have been the case without detriment to the Princess’s ability to work a miracle. The companions had wandered through the great halls and courts of the hospital; had gazed up at the glories of the famous painted chamber and admired the long and lurid series of the naval victories of England (Muniment remarking to his friend that he supposed he had seen the match to all that in foreign parts — offensive little traveled beggar that he was). They had not ordered a fish-dinner either at the Trafalgar or the Ship (having a frugal vision of tea and shrimps with Rosy, on their return), but they had labored up and down the steep undulations of the shabby, charming park; made advances to the tame deer, and seen them amble foolishly away; watched the young of both sexes, hilarious and red in the face, roll in promiscuous entanglement over the slopes; gazed at the little brick observatory, perched on one of the knolls, which sets the time of English history, and in which Hyacinth could see that his companion took a kind of technical interest; wandered out of one of the upper gates, and admired the trimness of the little villas at Blackheath, where Muniment declared that it was his idea of supreme social success to be able to live. He pointed out two or three small, semidetached houses, faced with stucco, and with “Mortimer Lodge” or “The Sycamores” inscribed upon the gateposts, and Hyacinth guessed that these were the sort of place he would like to end his days in — in high, pure air, with a genteel window for Rosy’s couch and a cheerful view of suburban excursions. It was when they came back into the park that, being rather hot and a little satiated, they stretched themselves under a tree and Hyacinth yielded to his curiosity.

“Sweet on her — sweet on her, my boy!” said Muniment. “I might as well be sweet on the dome of St. Paul’s, which I just make out off there.”

“The dome of St. Paul’s doesn’t come to see you, and doesn’t ask you to return the visit.”

“Oh, I don’t return visits — I’ve got a lot of jobs of my own to do. If I don’t put myself out for the Princess, isn’t that a sufficient answer to your question?”

“I’m by no means sure,” said Hyacinth. “If you went to see her, simply and civilly, because she asked you, I shouldn’t regard it as a proof that you had taken a fancy to her. Your hanging off is more suspicious; it may mean that you don’t trust yourself — that you are in danger of falling in love if you go in for a more intimate acquaintance.”

“It’s a rum job, your wanting me to make up to her. I shouldn’t think it would suit your book,” Muniment rejoined, staring at the sky, with his hands clasped under his head.

“Do you suppose I’m afraid of you?” his companion asked. “Besides,” Hyacinth added in a moment, “why the devil should I care, now?”

Muniment, for a little, made no rejoinder; he turned over on his side, and with his arm resting on the ground leaned his head on his hand. Hyacinth felt his eyes on his face, but he also felt himself coloring, and didn’t meet them. He had taken a private vow never to indulge, to Muniment, in certain inauspicious references, and the words he had just spoken had slipped out of his mouth too easily. “What do you mean by that?” Paul demanded, at last; and when Hyacinth looked at him he saw nothing but his companion’s strong, fresh, irresponsible face. Muniment, before speaking, had had time to guess what he meant by it.

Suddenly, an impulse that he had never known before, or rather that he had always resisted, took possession of him. There was a mystery which it concerned his happiness to clear up, and he became unconscious of his scruples, of his pride, of the strength that he had believed to be in him — the strength for going through his work and passing away without a look behind. He sat forward on the grass, with his arms round his knees, and bent upon Muniment a face lighted up by his difficulties. For a minute the two men’s eyes met with extreme clearness, and then Hyacinth exclaimed, “What an extraordinary fellow you are!”

“You’ve hit it there!” said Muniment, smiling.

“I don’t want to make a scene, or work on your feelings, but how will you like it when I’m strung up on the gallows?”

“You mean for Hoffendahl’s job? That’s what you were alluding to just now?” Muniment lay there, in the same attitude, chewing a long blade of dry grass, which he held to his lips with his free hand.

“I didn’t mean to speak of it; but after all, why shouldn’t it come up? Naturally, I have thought of it a good deal.”

“What good does that do?” Muniment returned. “I hoped you didn’t, and I noticed you never spoke of it. You don’t like it; you would rather throw it up,” he added.

There was not in his voice the faintest note of irony or contempt, no sign whatever that he passed judgment on such a tendency. He spoke in a quiet, human, memorizing manner, as if it had originally quite entered into his thought to allow for weak regrets. Nevertheless, the complete reasonableness of his tone itself cast a chill on his companion’s spirit; it was like the touch of a hand at once very firm and very soft, but strangely cold.

“I don’t want in the least to throw the business up, but did you suppose I liked it?” Hyacinth asked, with rather a forced laugh.

“My dear fellow, how could I tell? You like a lot of things I don’t. You like excitement and emotion and change, you like remarkable sensations, whereas I go in for a holy calm, for sweet repose.”

“If you object for yourself to change, and are so fond of still waters, why have you associated yourself with a revolutionary movement?” Hyacinth demanded, with a little air of making rather a good point.

“Just for that reason!” Muniment answered, with a smile. “Isn’t our revolutionary movement as quiet as the grave? Who knows, who suspects, anything like the full extent of it?”

“I see — you take only the quiet parts!”

In speaking these words Hyacinth had had no derisive intention, but a moment later he flushed with the sense that they had a sufficiently petty sound. Muniment, however, appeared to see no offense in them, and it was in the gentlest, most suggestive way, as if he had been thinking over what might comfort his comrade, that he replied, “There’s one thing you ought to remember — that it’s quite on the cards it may never come off.”

“I don’t desire that reminder,” Hyacinth said; “and, moreover, you must let me say that, somehow, I don’t easily fancy you mixed up with things that don’t come off. Anything you have to do with will come off, I think.”

Muniment reflected a moment, as if his little companion were charmingly ingenious. “Surely, I have nothing to do with this idea of Hoffendahl’s.”

“With the execution, perhaps not; but how about the conception? You seemed to me to have a great deal to do with it the night you took me to see him.”

Muniment changed his position, raising himself, and in a moment he was seated, Turk-fashion, beside his mate. He put his arm over his shoulder and held him, studying his face; and then, in the kindest manner in the world, he remarked, “There are three or four definite chances in your favor.”

“I don’t want comfort, you know,” said Hyacinth, with his eyes on the distant atmospheric mixture that represented London.

“What the devil do you want?” Muniment asked, still holding him, and with perfect good-humor.

“Well, to get inside of you a little; to know how a chap feels when he’s going to part with his best friend.”

“To part with him?” Muniment repeated.

“I mean, putting it at the worst.”

“I should think you would know by yourself, if you’re going to part with me!”

At this Hyacinth prostrated himself, tumbled over on the grass, on his face, which he buried in his arms. He remained in this attitude, saying nothing, for a long time; and while he lay there he thought, with a sudden, quick flood of association, of many strange things. Most of all, he had the sense of the brilliant, charming day; the warm stillness, touched with cries of amusement; the sweetness of loafing there, in an interval of work, with a friend who was a tremendously fine fellow, even if he didn’t understand the inexpressible. Muniment also kept silent, and Hyacinth perceived that he was unaffectedly puzzled. He wanted now to relieve him, so that he pulled himself together again and turned round, saying the first thing he could think of, in relation to the general subject of their conversation, that would carry them away from the personal question: “I have asked you before, and you have told me, but “somehow I have never quite grasped it (so I just touch on the matter again), exactly what good you think it will do.”

“This idea of Hoffendahl’s? You must remember that as yet we know only very vaguely what it is. It is difficult, therefore, to measure closely the importance it may have, and I don’t think I have ever, in talking with you, pretended to fix that importance. I don’t suppose it will matter immensely whether your own engagement is carried out or not; but if it is, it will have been a detail in a scheme of which the general effect will be decidedly useful. I believe, and you pretend to believe, though I am not sure you do, in the advent of the democracy. It will help the democracy to get possession, that the classes that keep them down shall be admonished from time to time that they have a very definite and very determined intention of doing so. An immense deal will depend upon that. Hoffendahl is an excellent admonisher.”

Hyacinth listened to this explanation with an expression of interest that was not feigned; and after a moment he rejoined, “When you say you believe in the democracy, I take for granted you mean you positively

wish for their coming into power, as I have always supposed. Now what I really have never understood is this — why you should desire to put forward a lot of people whom you regard, almost without exception, as donkeys."

"Ah, my dear lad," laughed Muniment, "when one undertakes to meddle in human affairs one must deal with human material. The upper classes have the longest ears."

"I have heard you say that you were working for an equality in human conditions, to abolish the immemorial inequality. What you want, then, for all mankind is a similar nuance of asininity."

"That's very clever; did you pick it up in France? The low tone of our fellow-mortals is a result of bad conditions; it is the conditions I want to alter. When those that have no start to speak of have a good one, it is but fair to infer that they will go further. I want to try them, you know."

"But why equality?" Hyacinth asked. "Somehow, that word doesn't say so much to me as it used to. Inequality — inequality! I don't know whether it's by dint of repeating it over to myself, but that doesn't shock me as it used."

"They didn't put you up to that in France, I'm sure!" Muniment exclaimed. "Your point of view has changed; you have risen in the world."

"Risen? Good God, what have I risen to?"

"True enough; you were always a bloated little swell!" And Muniment gave his young friend a sociable slap on the back. There was a momentary bitterness in its being imputed to such a one as Hyacinth, even in joke, that he had taken sides with the fortunate ones of the earth, and he had it on his tongue's end to ask his friend if he had never guessed what his proud titles were — the bastard of a murderess, spawned in a gutter, out of which he had been picked by a sewing-girl. But his lifelong reserve on this point was a habit not easily broken, and before such an inquiry could flash through it Muniment had gone on: "If you've ceased to believe we can do anything, it will be rather awkward, you know."

"I don't know what I believe, God help me!" Hyacinth remarked, in a tone of an effect so lugubrious that Paul gave one of his longest, most boyish-sounding laughs. And he added, "I don't want you to think I have ceased to care for the people. What am I but one of the poorest and meanest of them?"

"You, my boy? You 're a duke in disguise, and so I thought the first time I ever saw you. That night I took you to Hoffendahl you had a little way with you that made me forget it; I mean that your disguise happened to be better than usual. As regards caring for the people, there's surely no obligation at all," Muniment continued. "I wouldn't if I could help it — I promise you that. It all depends on what you see. The way I've used my eyes in this abominable metropolis has led to my seeing that present arrangements won't do. They won't do," he repeated, placidly.

"Yes, I see that, too," said Hyacinth, with the same dolefulness that had marked his tone a moment before — a dolefulness begotten of the rather helpless sense that, whatever he saw, he saw (and this was always the case) so many other things beside. He saw the immeasurable misery of the people, and yet he saw all that had been, as it were, saved and marked off from it: the treasures, the felicities, the splendors, the successes, of the world. All this took the form, sometimes, to his imagination, of a vast, vague, dazzling presence, an irradiation of light from objects undefined, mixed with the atmosphere of Paris and of Venice. He presently added that a hundred things Muniment had told him about the foul horrors of the worst districts of London, pictures of incredible shame and suffering that he had put before him, came back to him now, with the memory of the passion they had kindled at the time.

"Oh, I don't want you to go by what I have told you; I want you to go by what you have seen yourself. I remember there were things you told me that weren't bad in their way." And at this Paul Muniment sprang to his feet, as if their conversation had drawn to an end, or they must at all events be thinking of their homeward way. Hyacinth got up, too, while his companion stood there. Muniment was looking off toward London, with a face that expressed all the healthy singleness of his vision. Suddenly Paul remarked, as if it occurred to him to complete, or at any rate confirm, the declaration he had made a short time before, "Yes, I don't believe in the millennium, but I do believe in the democracy."

The young man, as he spoke these words, struck his comrade as such a fine embodiment of the spirit of the people; he stood there, in his powerful, sturdy freshness, with such an air of having learnt what he had learnt and of goodnature that had purposes in it, that our hero felt the simple inrush of his old, frequent pride at having a person of that promise, a nature of that capacity, for a friend. He passed his hand into Muniment's arm, and said, with an imperceptible tremor in his voice, "It's no use your saying I'm not to go by what you tell me. I would go by what you tell me, anywhere. There's no awkwardness to speak of. I don't know that I believe exactly what you believe, but I believe in you, and doesn't that come to the same thing?"

Muniment evidently appreciated the cordiality and candor of this little tribute, and the way he showed it was by a movement of his arm, to check his companion, before they started to leave the spot, and by looking down at him with a certain anxiety of friendliness. "I should never have taken you to Hoffendahl if I hadn't thought you would jump at the job. It was that flaring little oration of yours, at the club, when you floored Delancey for saying you were afraid, that put me up to it."

"I did jump at it — upon my word I did; and it was just what I was looking for. That's all correct!" said Hyacinth, cheerfully, as they went forward. There was a strain of heroism in these words — of heroism of which the sense was not conveyed to Muniment by a vibration in their interlocked arms. Hyacinth did not

make the reflection that he was infernally literal; he dismissed the sentimental problem that had bothered him; he condoned, excused, admired, and merged himself, resting happy for the time in the consciousness that Paul was a grand fellow, that friendship was a purer feeling than love, and that there was an immense deal of affection between them. He did not even observe at that moment that it was preponderantly on his own side.

Chapter XXXVI

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A CERTAIN Sunday in November, more than three months after she had gone to live in Madeira Crescent, was so important an occasion for the Princess Casamassima that I must give as complete an account of it as the limits of my space will allow. Early in the afternoon a loud peal from her door knocker came to her ear; it had a sound of resolution, expressing almost defiance, which made her look up from her book and listen. She was sitting by the fire, alone, with a volume of a heavy work on Labor and Capital in her hand. It was not yet four o'clock, but she had had candles for an hour; a dense brown fog made the daylight impure, without suggesting an answer to the question whether the scheme of nature had been to veil or to deepen the sabbatical dreariness. She Was not tired of Madeira Crescent — such an idea she would indignantly have repudiated; but the prospect of a visitor was rather pleasant to her — the possibility even of his being an ambassador, or a cabinet minister, or another of the eminent personages with whom she had associated before embracing the ascetic life. They had not knocked at her present door hitherto in any great numbers, for more reasons than one; they were out of town, and she had taken pains to diffuse the belief that she had left England. If the impression prevailed, it was exactly the impression she had desired; she forgot this fact whenever she felt a certain surprise, even, it may be, a certain irritation, in perceiving that people were not taking the way to Madeira Crescent. She was making the discovery, in which she had had many predecessors, that in London it is only too possible to hide one's self. It was very much in that fashion that Godfrey Sholto was in the habit of announcing himself, when he reappeared after the intervals she explicitly imposed upon him; there was a kind of artlessness, for so world-worn a personage, in the point he made of showing that he knocked with confidence, that he had as good a right as any other. This afternoon she was ready to accept a visit from him: she was perfectly detached from the shallow, frivolous world in which he lived, but there. was still a freshness in her renunciation which coveted reminders and enjoyed comparisons; he would prove to her how right she had been to do exactly what she was doing. It did not occur to her that Hyacinth Robinson might be at her door, for it was understood between them that, except by special appointment, he was to come to see her only in the evening. She heard in the hall, when the servant arrived, a voice that she failed to recognize; but in a moment the door of the room was thrown open, and the name of Mr. Muniment was pronounced. It may be said at once that she felt great pleasure in hearing it, for she had both wished to see more of Hyacinth's extraordinary friend and had given him up, so little likely had it begun to appear that he would put himself out for her. She had been glad he wouldn't come, as she had told Hyacinth three months before; but now that he had come she was still more glad.

Presently he was sitting opposite to her, on the other side of the fire, with his big foot crossed over his big knee, his large, gloved hands fumbling with each other, drawing and smoothing the gloves (of very red, new-looking dogskin) in places, as if they hurt him. So far as the size of his extremities, and even his attitude and movement, went, he might have belonged to her former circle. With the details of his dress remaining vague in the lamplight, which threw into relief mainly his powerful, important head, he might have been one of the most considerable men she had ever known. The first thing she said to him was that she wondered extremely what had brought him at last to come to see her: the idea, when she proposed it, evidently had so little attraction for him. She had only seen him once since then — the day she met him coming into Audley Court as she was leaving it, after a visit to his sister — and, as he probably remembered, she had not on that occasion repeated her invitation.

"It wouldn't have done any good, at the time, if you had," Muniment rejoined, with his natural laugh.

"Oh, I felt that; my silence wasn't accidental!" the Princess exclaimed, joining in his merriment.

"I have only come now — since you have asked me the reason — because my sister hammered at me, week after week, dinning it into me that I ought to. Oh, I've been under the lash! If she had left me alone, I wouldn't have come."

The Princess blushed on hearing these words; but not with shame or with pain; rather, with the happy excitement of being spoken to in a manner so fresh and original. She had never before had a visitor who practiced so racy a frankness, or who, indeed, had so curious a story to tell. She had never before so completely failed, and her failure greatly interested her, especially as it seemed now to be turning a little to success. She had succeeded promptly with every one, and the sign of it was that every one had rendered her a monotony of homage. Even poor little Hyacinth had tried, in the beginning, to say sweet things to her. This very different type of man appeared to have his thoughts fixed on anything but sweetness; she felt the liveliest hope that he would move further and further away from it. "I remember what you asked me — what good it would do you. I couldn't tell you then; and though I now have had a long time to turn it over, I haven't thought of it yet."

"Oh, but I hope it will do me some," said Paul. "A fellow wants a reward, when he has made a great effort."

"It does me some," the Princess remarked, gayly.

"Naturally, the awkward things I say amuse you. But I don't say them for that, but just to give you an idea."

“You give me a great many ideas. Besides, I know you already a good deal.”

“From little Robinson, I suppose,” said Muniment.

The Princess hesitated. “More particularly from Lady Aurora.”

“Oh, she doesn’t know much about me!” the young man exclaimed.

“It’s a pity you say that, because she likes you.”

“Yes, she likes me,” Muniment replied, serenely.

Again the Princess hesitated. “And I hope you like her.”

“Ay, she’s a dear old girl!”

The Princess reflected that her visitor was not a gentleman, like Hyacinth; hut this made no difference in her present attitude. The expectation that he would be a gentleman had had nothing to do with her interest in him; that, in fact, had rested largely on the supposition that he was a natural democrat. “I don’t know that there is any one in the world I envy so much,” she remarked, an observation which her visitor received in silence. “Better than any one I have ever met, she has solved the problem — which, if we are wise, we all try to solve, don’t we? — of getting out of herself. She has got out of herself more perfectly than any one I have ever known. She has merged herself in the passion of doing something for others. That’s why I envy her,” said the Princess, with an explanatory smile, as if perhaps he didn’t understand her.

“It’s an amusement, like any other,” said Paul Muniment.

“Ah, not like any other! It carries light into dark places; it makes a great many wretched people considerably less wretched.”

“How many, eh?” asked the young man, not exactly as if he wished to dispute, but as if it were always in him to enjoy an argument.

The Princess wondered why he should desire to argue at Lady Aurora’s expense. ““Well, one who is very near to you, to begin with.”

“Oh, she’s kind, most kind; it’s altogether wonderful. But Rosy makes her considerably less wretched,” Paul Muniment rejoined.

“Very likely, of course; and so she does me.”

“May I inquire what you are wretched about?” Muniment went on.

“About nothing at all. That’s the worst of it. But I am much happier now than I have ever been.”

“Is that also about nothing?”

“No, about a sort of change that has taken place in my life. I have been able to do some little things.”

“For the poor, I suppose you mean. Do you refer to the presents you have made to Rosy?” the young man inquired.

“The presents?” The Princess appeared not to remember. “Oh, those are trifles. It isn’t anything one has been able to give; it’s some talks one has had, some convictions one has arrived at.”

“Convictions are a source of very innocent pleasure,” said the young man, smiling at his interlocutress with his bold, pleasant eyes, which seemed to project their glance further than any she had seen.

“Having them is nothing. It’s the acting on them,” the Princess replied.

“Yes; that doubtless, too, is good.” He continued to look at her serenely, as if he liked to consider that this might be what she had asked him to come for. He said nothing more, and she went on:

“It’s far better, of course, when one is a man.”

“I don’t know. “Women do pretty well what they like. My sister and you have managed, between you, to bring me to this.”

“It’s more your sister, I suspect, than I. But why, after all, should you have disliked so much to come?”

“Well, since you ask me,” .said Paul Muniment, “I will tell you frankly, though I don’t mean it uncivilly, that I don’t know what to make of you.”

“Most people don’t,” returned the Princess. “But they usually take the risk.”

“Ah, well, I’m the most prudent of men.”

“I was sure of it; that is one of the reasons why I wanted to know you. I know what some of your ideas are — Hyacinth Robinson has told me; and the source of my interest in them is partly the fact that you consider very carefully what you attempt.”

“That I do — I do,” said Muniment, simply.

The tone in which he said this would have been almost ignoble, as regards a kind of northern canniness which it expressed, had it not been corrected by the character of his face, his youth and strength, and his military eye. The Princess recognized both the shrewdness and the latent audacity as she rejoined, “To do anything with you would be very safe. It would be sure to succeed.”

“That’s what poor Hyacinth thinks,” said Paul Muniment.

The Princess wondered a little that he could allude in that light tone to the faith their young friend had placed in him, considering the consequences such a trustfulness had had for him; but this curious mixture of qualities could only make her visitor, as a tribune of the people, more interesting to her. She abstained, for the moment, from touching on the subject of Hyacinth’s peculiar position, and only said, “Hasn’t he told you about me? Hasn’t he explained me a little?”

“Oh, his explanations are grand!” Muniment exclaimed, gayly. “He’s rare sport when he talks about you.”

“Don’t betray him,” said the Princess, gently.

“There’s nothing to betray. You would be the first to admire it if you were there. Besides, I don’t betray,” the young man added.

“I love him very much,” said the Princess; and it would have been impossible for the most impudent cynic to smile at the manner in which she made the declaration.

Paul accepted it, respectfully. “He’s a sweet little lad, and, putting her ladyship aside, quite the light of our home.”

There was a short pause after this exchange of amenities, which the Princess terminated by inquiring, “Wouldn’t some one else do his work quite as well?”

“His work? Why, I’m told he’s a master hand.”

“Oh, I don’t mean his bookbinding.” Then the Princess added, “I don’t know whether you know it, but I am in correspondence with Hoffendahl. I am acquainted with many of our most important men.”

“Yes, I know it. Hyacinth has told me. Do you mention it as a guarantee, so that I may know you are genuine?”

“Not exactly; that would be weak, wouldn’t it?” the Princess asked. “My genuineness must be in myself — a matter for you to appreciate as you know me better; not in my references and vouchers.”

“I shall never know you better. What business is it of mine?”

“I want to help you,” said the Princess, and as she made this earnest appeal her face became transfigured; it wore an expression of the most passionate yet the purest longing. “I want to do something for the cause you represent; for the millions that are rotting under our feet — the millions whose whole life is passed on the brink of starvation, so that the smallest accident pushes them over. Try me, test me; ask me to put my hand to something, to prove that I am as deeply in earnest as those who have already given proof. I know what I am talking about — what one must meet and face and count with, the nature and the immensity of your organization. I am not playing. No, I am not playing.”

Paul Muniment watched her with his steady smile until this sudden outbreak had spent itself. “I was afraid you would be like this — that you would be eloquent and passionate.”

“Permit me to believe you thought nothing about it. There is no reason my eloquence should disturb you.”

“I have always had a fear of women.”

“I see — that’s a part of your prudence,” said the Princess, reflectively. “But you ‘re the sort of man who ought to know how to use them.”

Muniment said nothing, immediately, in answer to this; the way he appeared to consider the Princess suggested that he was not following closely what she said, so much as losing himself in certain matters which were beside that question — her beauty, for instance, her grace, her fragrance, the spectacle of a manner and quality so new to him. After a little, however, he remarked, irrelevantly, “I’m afraid I’m very rude.”

“Of course you are, but it doesn’t signify. What I mainly object to is that you don’t answer my questions. Would not some one else do Hyacinth Robinson’s work quite as well? Is it necessary to take a nature so delicate, so intellectual? Oughtn’t we to keep him for something finer?”

“Finer than what?”

“Than what Hoffendahl will call upon him to do.”

“And pray what is that?” the young man demanded. “You know nothing about it; no more do I,” he added in a moment. “It will require whatever it will. Besides, if some one else might have done it, no one else volunteered. It happened that Hyacinth did.”

“Yes, and you nipped him up!” the Princess exclaimed.

At this expression Muniment burst out laughing. “I have no doubt you can easily keep him, if you want him.”

“I should like to do it in his place — that’s what I should like,” said the Princess.

“As I say, you don’t even know what it is.”

“It may be nothing,” she went on, with her grave eyes fixed on her visitor. “I dare say you think that what I wanted to see you for was to beg you to let him off. But it wasn’t. Of course it’s his own affair, and you can do nothing. But oughtn’t it to make some difference, when his opinions have changed?”

“His opinions? He never had any opinions,” Muniment replied. “He is not like you and me.”

“Well, then, his feelings, his attachments. He hasn’t the passion for democracy he had when I first knew him. He’s much more tepid.”

“Ah, well, he’s quite right.”

The Princess stared. “Do you mean that you are giving up” —

“A fine stiff conservative is a thing I perfectly understand,” said Paul Muniment. “If I were on the top, I’d stick there.”

“I see, you are not narrow,” the Princess murmured, appreciatively.

“I beg your pardon, I am. I don’t call that wide. One must be narrow to penetrate.”

“Whatever you are, you’ll succeed,” said the Princess. “Hyacinth won’t, but you will.”

“It depends upon what you call success!” the young man exclaimed. And in a moment, before she replied, he added, looking about the room, “You’ve got a very lovely dwelling.”

“Lovely? My dear sir, it’s hideous. That’s what I like it for,” the Princess added.

“Well, I like it; but perhaps I don’t know the reason. I thought you had given up everything — despoiled

and disinherited yourself."

"Well, so I have. You should have seen me before."

"I should have liked that," said Muniment, smiling. "I like to see wealth."

"Ah, you 're as bad as Hyacinth. I am the only consistent one," the Princess sighed.

"You have a great deal left, for a person who has given everything away."

"These are not mine — these abominations — or I would give them, too!" Paul's hostess rejoined, artlessly.

Muniment got up from his chair, still looking about the room. "I would give my nose for such a place as this. At any rate, you are not yet reduced to poverty."

"I have a little left — to help you."

"I dare say you've a great deal," said Paul, with his north country accent.

"I could get money — I could get money," the Princess continued, gravely. She had also risen, and was standing before him.

These two remarkable persons faced each other, their eyes met again, and they exchanged a long, deep glance of mutual scrutiny. Each seemed to drop a plummet into the other's mind. Then a strange and, to the Princess, unexpected expression passed over the countenance of the young man; his lips compressed themselves, as if he were making a strong effort, his color rose, and in a moment he stood there blushing like a boy. He dropped his eyes and stared at the carpet, while he remarked, "I don't trust women — I don't trust women!"

"I am sorry, but, after all, I can understand it," said the Princess; "therefore I won't insist on the question of your allowing me to work with you. But this appeal I will make to you: help me a little yourself — help me!"

"How do you mean, help you?" Muniment demanded, raising his eyes, which had a new, conscious look.

"Advise me; you will know how. I am in trouble — I have gone very far."

"I have no doubt of that!" said Paul, laughing.

"I mean with some of those people abroad. I'm not frightened, but I'm perplexed; I want to know what to do."

"No, you are not frightened," Muniment rejoined, after a moment.

"I am, however, in a sad entanglement. I think you can straighten it out. I will give you the facts, but not now, for we shall be interrupted; I hear my old lady on the stairs. For this, you must come to see me again."

At this point the door opened, and Madame Grandoni appeared, cautiously, creepingly, as if she didn't know what might be going on in the parlor. "Yes, I will come again," said Paul Muniment, in a low but distinct tone; and he walked away, passing Madame Grandoni on the threshold, without having exchanged the handshake of farewell with his hostess. In the hall he paused an instant, feeling she was behind him; and he learned that she had not come to exact from him this omitted observance, but to say once more, dropping her voice, so that her companion, through the open door, might not hear, —

"I could get money — I could!"

Muniment passed his hand through his hair, and, as if he had not heard her, remarked, "I have not given you, after all, half Rosy's messages."

"Oh, that doesn't matter!" the Princess answered, turning back into the parlor.

Madame Grandoni was in the middle of the room, wrapped in an old shawl, looking vaguely around her, and the two ladies heard the house door close. "And pray, who may that be? Isn't it a new face?" the elder one inquired.

"He's the brother of the little person I took you to see over the river — the chattering cripple with the wonderful manners."

"Ah, she had a brother! That, then, was why you went?"

It was striking, the goodhumour with which the Princess received this rather coarse thrust, which could have been drawn from Madame Grandoni only by the petulance and weariness of increasing age, and the antipathy she now felt to Madeira Crescent and everything it produced. Christina bent a calm, charitable smile upon her ancient companion, and replied, —

"There could have been no question of our seeing him. at his work."

"Ah, how do I know, my dear? And is he a successor?"

"A successor?"

"To the little bookbinder."

"My darling," said the Princess, "you will see how absurd that question is when I tell you he is his greatest friend!"

Chapter XXXVII

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HALF AN HOUR after Paul Muniment's departure the Princess heard another rat-tat-tat at her door; but this was a briefer, discreeter peal, and was accompanied by a faint tintinnabulation. The person who had produced it was presently ushered in, without, however, causing Madame Grandoni to look round, or rather to look up,

from an armchair as low as a sitz-bath, and of very much the shape of such a receptacle, in which, near the fire, she had been immersed. She left this care to the Princess, who rose on hearing the name of the visitor pronounced, inadequately, by her maid. “Mr. Fetch,” Assunta called it; but the Princess recognized without difficulty the little fat, rusty fiddler of whom Hyacinth had talked to her, who, as Pinnie’s most intimate friend, had been so mixed up with his existence, and whom she herself had always had a curiosity to see. Hyacinth had not told her he was coming, and the unexpectedness of the apparition added to its interest. Much as she liked seeing queer types and exploring out-of-the-way social corners, she never engaged in a fresh encounter, nor formed a new relation of this kind, without a fit of nervousness, a fear that she might be awkward and fail to hit the right tone. She perceived in a moment, however, that Mr. Vetch would take her as she was, and require no special adjustments;

He was a gentleman and a man of experience, and she would only have to leave the tone to him. He stood there with his large, polished hat in his two hands, a hat of the fashion of ten years before, with a rusty sheen and an undulating brim — stood there without a salutation or a speech, but with a little fixed, acute, tentative smile, which seemed half to inquire and half to explain. What he explained was that he was clever enough to be trusted, and that if he had come to see her that way, abruptly, without an invitation, he had a reason which she would be sure to think good enough when she should hear it. There was even a certain jauntiness in this confidence — an insinuation that he knew how to present himself to a lady; and though it quickly appeared that he really did, that was the only thing about him that was inferior — it suggested a long experience of actresses at rehearsal, with whom he had formed habits of advice and compliment.

“I know who you are — I know who you are,” said the Princess, though she could easily see that he knew she did.

“I wonder whether you also know why I have come to see you,” Mr. Vetch replied, presenting the top of his hat to her as if it were a looking-glass.

“No, but it doesn’t matter. I am very glad; you might even have come before.” Then the Princess added, with her characteristic honesty, “Don’t you know of the great interest I have taken in your nephew?”

“In my nephew? Yes, my young friend Robinson. It is in regard to him that I have ventured to intrude upon you.”

The Princess had been on the point of pushing a chair toward him, but she stopped in the act, staring, with a smile. “Ah, I hope you haven’t come to ask me to give him up!”

“On the contrary — on the contrary!” the old man rejoined, lifting his hand expressively, and with his head on one side, as if he were holding his violin.

“How do you mean, on the contrary?” the Princess demanded, after he had seated himself and she had sunk into her former place. As if that might sound contradictious, she went on: “Surely he hasn’t any fear that I shall cease to be a good friend to him?”

“I don’t know what he fears; I don’t know what he hopes,” said Mr. Vetch, looking at her now with a face in which she could see there was something more tonic than old-fashioned politeness. “It will be difficult to tell you, but at least I must try. Properly speaking, I suppose, it’s no business of mine, as I am not a blood relation to the boy; but I have known him since he was an urchin, and I can’t help saying that I thank you for your great kindness to him.”

“All the same, I don’t think you like it,” the Princess remarked. “To me it oughtn’t to be difficult to say anything.”

“He has told me very little about you; he doesn’t know I have taken this step,” the fiddler said, turning his eyes about the room, and letting them rest on Madame Grandoni.

“Why do you call it a ‘step’?” the Princess asked. “That’s what people say when they have to do something disagreeable.”

“I call very seldom on ladies. It’s a long time since I have been in the house of a person like the Princess Casamassima. I remember the last time,” said the old man. “It was to get some money from a lady at whose party I had been playing — for a dance.”

“You must bring your fiddle some time, and play to us. Of course I don’t mean for money,” the Princess rejoined.

“I will do it with pleasure, or any thing else that will gratify you. But my ability is very small. I only know vulgar music — things that are played at theatres.”

“I don’t believe that; there must be things you play for yourself, in your room, alone.”

For a moment the old man made no reply; then he said, “Now that I see you, that I hear you, it helps me to understand.”

“I don’t think you do see me!” cried the Princess, kindly, laughing; while the fiddler went on to ask whether there were any danger of Hyacinth’s coming in while he was there. The Princess replied that he never came, unless by prearrangement, but in the evening, and Mr. Vetch made a request that she would not let their young friend know that he himself had been with her. “It doesn’t matter; he will guess it, he will know it by instinct, as soon as he comes in. He is terribly subtle,” said the Princess; and she added that she had never been able to hide anything from him. Perhaps it served her right, for attempting to make a mystery of things that were not worth it.

“How well you know him!” Mr. Vetch murmured, with his eyes wandering again to Madame Grandoni,

who paid no attention to him as she sat staring at the fire. He delayed, visibly, to say what he had come for, and his hesitation could only be connected with the presence of the old lady. He said to himself that the Princess might have divined this from his manner; he had an idea that he could trust himself to convey such an intimation with clearness and yet with delicacy. But the most she appeared to apprehend was that he desired to be presented to her companion.

"You must know the most delightful of women. She also takes a particular interest in Mr. Robinson: of a different kind from mine — much more sentimental," and then she explained to the old lady, who seemed absorbed in other ideas, that Mr. Vetch was a distinguished musician, a person whom she, who had known so many in her day, and was so fond of that kind of thing, would like to talk with. The Princess spoke of "that kind of thing" quite as if she herself had given it up, though Madame Grandoni heard her by the hour together improvising on the piano revolutionary battle-songs and paeans.

"I think you are laughing at me," Mr. Vetch said to the Princess, while Madame Grandoni twisted herself slowly round in her chair, and considered him. She looked at him leisurely, up and down, and then she observed, with a sigh —

"Strange people — strange people!"

"It is indeed a strange world, ma-dame," the fiddler replied; and he then inquired of the Princess whether he might have a little conversation with her in private.

She looked about her, embarrassed and smiling. "My dear sir, I have only this one room to receive in. We live in a very small way."

"Yes, your ladyship is laughing at me. Your ideas are very large, too. However, I would gladly come at any-other time that might suit you."

"You impute tome higher spirits than I possess. Why should I be so gay?" the Princess asked. "I should be delighted to see you again. I am extremely curious as to what you may have to say to me. I would even meet you anywhere — in Kensington Gardens or the British Museum."

The fiddler looked at her a moment before replying; then, with his white old face flushing a little, he exclaimed, "Poor dear little Hyacinth!"

Madame Grandoni made an effort to rise from her chair, but she had sunk so low that at first it was not successful. Mr. Vetch gave her his hand, to help her, and she slowly erected herself, keeping hold of him for a moment after she stood there. "What did she tell me? That you are a great musician? Isn't that enough for any man? You ought to be content, my dear gentleman. It has sufficed for people whom I don't believe you surpass."

"I don't surpass any one," said poor Mr. Vetch. "I don't know what you take me for."

"You are not a conspirator, then? You are not an assassin? It surprises me, but so much the better. In this house one can never know. It is not a good house, and if you are a respectable person it is a pity you should come here. Yes, she is very gay, and I am very sad. I don't know how it will end. After me, I hope. The world is not good, certainly; but God alone can make it better." And as the fiddler expressed the hope that he was not the-cause of her leaving the room, she went on, "Dock, dock, you are the cause; but why not you as well as another? I am always leaving it for some one or for some thing, and I would sooner do so for an honest man, if you are one — but, as I say, who can tell? — than for a destroyer. I wander about. I have no rest. I have, however, a very nice room, the best in the house. Me, at least, she does not treat ill. It looks to-day like the end of all things. If you would turn your climate the other side up, the rest would do well enough. Goodnight to you, whoever you are."

The old lady shuffled away, in spite of Mr. Vetch's renewed apologies, and the Princess stood before the fire, watching her companions, while he opened the door. "She goes away, she comes back; it doesn't matter. She thinks it's a bad house, but she knows it would be worse without her. I remember now," the Princess added. "Mr. Robinson told me that you had been a great democrat in old days, but that now you had ceased to care for the people."

"The people — the people? That is a vague term. Whom do you mean?"

The Princess hesitated. "Those you used to care for, to plead for; those who are underneath every one, everything, and have the whole social mass trampling on them."

"I see you think I'm a renegade. The way certain classes arrogate to themselves the title of the people has never pleased me. Why are some human beings the people, and the people only, and others not? I am of the people myself, I have worked all my days like a knife-grinder, and I have really never changed."

"You must not let me make you angry," said the Princess, laughing, and sitting down again. "I am sometimes very provoking, but you must stop me off. You wouldn't think it, perhaps, but no one takes a snub better than I."

Mr. Vetch dropped his eyes a minute; he appeared to wish to show that he regarded such a speech as that as one of the Princess's characteristic humors, and knew that he should be wanting in respect to her if he took it seriously or made a personal application of it. "What I want is this," he began, after a moment: "that you will — that you will" — But he stopped before he had got further. She was watching him, listening to him, and she waited while he paused. It was a long pause, and she said nothing. "Princess," the old man broke out at last, "I would give my own life many times for that boy's!"

"I always told him you must have been fond of him!" she cried, with bright exultation.

"Fond of him? Pray, who can doubt it? I made him, I invented him!"

"He knows it, moreover," said the Princess, smiling. "It is an exquisite organization." And as the old man gazed at her, not knowing, apparently, what to make of her tone, she continued: "It is a very interesting opportunity for me to learn certain things. Speak to me of his early years. How was he as a child? When I like people I want to know everything about them."

"I shouldn't have supposed there was much left for you to learn about our young friend. You have taken possession of his life," the fiddler added, gravely.

"Yes, but as I understand yon, you don't complain of it? Sometimes one does so much more than one has intended. One must use one's influence for good," said the Princess, with the noble, gentle air of accessibility to reason that sometimes lighted up her face. And then she went on, irrelevantly: "I know the terrible story of his mother. He told it me himself, when he was staying with me; and in the course of my life I think I have never been more touched."

"That was my fault, that he ever learned it. I suppose he also told you that."

"Yes, but I think he understood your idea. If you had the question to determine again, would you judge differently?"

"I thought it would do him good," said the old man, simply and rather wearily.

"Well, I dare say it has," the Princess rejoined, with the manner of wishing to encourage him.

"I don't know what was in my head. I wanted him to quarrel with society. Now I want him to be reconciled to it," Mr. Vetch remarked, earnestly. He appeared to wish the Princess to understand that he made a great point of this.

"Ah, but he is!" she immediately returned. "We often talk about that; he is not like me, who see all kinds of abominations. He's a tremendous aristocrat. What more would you have?"

"Those are not the opinions that he expresses to me," said Mr. Vetch, shaking his head sadly. "I am greatly distressed, and I don't understand. I have not come here with the presumptuous wish to cross-examine you, but I should like very much to know if I am wrong in believing that he has gone about with you in the bad quarters — in St. Giles's and Whitechapel."

"We have certainly inquired and explored together," the Princess admitted, "and in the depths of this huge, luxurious, wanton, wasteful city we have seen sights of unspeakable misery and horror. But we have been not only in the slums; we have been to a music hall and a penny-reading."

The fiddler received this information at first in silence, so that his hostess went on to mention some of the phases of life they had observed; describing with great vividness, but at the same time with a kind of argumentative moderation, several scenes which did little honor to "our boasted civilization." "What wonder is it, then, that he should tell me that things cannot go on any longer as they are?" he asked, when, she had finished. "He said only the other day that he should regard himself as one of the most contemptible of human beings if he should do nothing to alter them, to better them."

"What wonder, indeed? But if he said that, he was in one of his bad days. He changes constantly, and his impressions change. The misery of the people is by no means always weighing on his heart. You tell me what he has told you; well, he has told me that the people may perish over and over, rather than the conquests of civilization shall be sacrificed to them. He declares, at such moments, that they will be sacrificed — sacrificed utterly — if the ignorant masses get the upper hand."

"He needn't be afraid! That will never happen."

"I don't know. We can at least try!"

"Try what you like, madam, but, for God's sake, get the boy out of his mess!"

The Princess had suddenly grown excited, in speaking of the cause she believed in, and she gave, for the moment, no heed to this appeal, which broke from Mr. Vetch's lips with a sudden passion of anxiety. Her beautiful head raised itself higher, and the deep expression that was always in her eyes became an extraordinary radiance. "Do you know what I say to Mr. Robinson when he makes such remarks as that to me? I ask him what he means by civilization. Let civilization come a little, first, and then we will talk about it. For the present, face to face with those horrors, I scorn it. I deny it!" And the Princess laughed ineffable things, like some splendid siren of the Revolution.

"The world is very sad and very hideous, and I am happy to say that I soon shall have done with it. But before I go I want to save Hyacinth. If he's a little aristocrat, as you say, there is so much the less fitness in his being compromised, entangled. If he doesn't even believe in what he pretends to do, that's a pretty situation! What is he in for, madam? What devilish folly has he undertaken?"

"He is a strange mixture of contradictory impulses," said the Princess, musingly. Then, as if calling herself back to the old man's question, she continued: "How can I enter into his affairs with you? How can I tell you his secrets? In the first place, I don't know them, and if I did — fancy me!"

The fiddler gave a long, low sigh, almost a moan, of discouragement and perplexity. He had told the Princess that now he saw her he understood how Hyacinth should have become her slave, but he would not have been able to tell her that he understood her own motives and mysteries, that he embraced the immense anomaly of her behavior. It came over him that she was incongruous and perverse, a more complicated form of the feminine character than any he had hitherto dealt with, and he felt helpless and baffled, foredoomed to failure. He had come prepared to flatter her without scruple, thinking that would be the clever, the efficacious,

method of dealing with her; but he now had a sense that this primitive device had, though it was strange, no application to such a nature, while his embarrassment was increased rather than diminished by the fact that the lady at least made the effort to be accommodating. He had put down his hat on the floor beside him, and his two hands were clasped on the knob of an umbrella which had long since renounced pretensions to compactness; he collapsed a little, and his chin rested on his folded hands. “Why do you take such a line? Why do you believe such things?” he asked; and he was conscious that his tone was weak and his inquiry beside the question.

“My dear sir, how do you know what I believe? However, I have my reasons, which it would take too long to tell you, and which, after all, would not particularly interest you. One must see life as one can; it comes, no doubt, to each of us in different ways. You think me affected, of course, and my behavior a fearful pose; but I am only trying to be natural. Are you not yourself a little inconsequent?” the Princess went on, with the bright mildness which had the effect of making Mr. Vetch feel that he should not extract any pledge of assistance from her. “You don’t want our young friend to pry into the wretchedness of London, because it excites his sense of justice. It is a strange thing to wish, for a person of whom one is fond and whom one esteems, that his sense of justice shall not be excited.”

“I don’t care a fig for his sense of justice — I don’t care a fig for the wretchedness of London; and if I were young, and beautiful, and clever, and brilliant, and of a noble position, like you, I should care still less. In that case I should have very little to say to a poor mechanic — a youngster who earns his living with a glue-pot and scraps of old leather.”

“Don’t misrepresent him; don’t make him out what you know he’s not!” the Princess retorted, with her baffling smile. “You know he’s one of the most civilized people possible.”

The fiddler sat breathing unhappily. “I only want to keep him — to get him free.” Then he added, “I don’t understand you very well. If you like him because he’s one of the lower orders, how can you like him because he’s a swell?”

The Princess turned her eyes on the fire a moment, as if this little problem might be worth considering, and presently she answered, “Dear Mr. Vetch, I am very sure you don’t mean to be impertinent, but some things you say have that effect. Nothing is more annoying than when one’s sincerity is doubted. I am not bound to explain myself to you. I ask of my friends to trust me, and of the others to leave me alone. Moreover, anything not very nice you may have said to me, out of awkwardness, is nothing to the insults I am perfectly prepared to see showered upon me before long. I shall do things which will produce a fine crop of them — oh, I shall do things, my dear sir! But I am determined not to mind them. Come, therefore, pull yourself together. We both take such an interest in young Robinson that I can’t see why in the world we should quarrel about him.”

“My dear lady,” the old man pleaded, “I have indeed not the least intention of failing in respect or courtesy, and you must excuse me if I don’t look after my manners. How can I when I am so worried, so haunted? God knows I don’t want to quarrel. As I tell you, I only want to get Hyacinth free.”

“Free from what?” the Princess asked.

“From some abominable brotherhood or international league that he belongs to, the thought of which keeps me awake at night. He’s just the sort of little fellow to be made a cat’s-paw.”

“Your fears seem very vague.”

“I hoped you would give me chapter and verse.”

“On what do your suspicions rest? What grounds have you?” the Princess inquired.

“Well, a great many; none of them very definite, but all contributing something — his appearance, his manner, the way he strikes me. Dear madam, one feels those things, one guesses. Do you know that poor, infatuated phrasemonger, Eustace Poupin, who works at the same place as Hyacinth? He’s a very old friend of mine, and he’s an honest man, considering everything. But he is always conspiring, and corresponding, and pulling strings that lead away into God knows what. He has nothing in life to complain of, and he drives a roaring trade. But he wants folks to be equal, heaven help him; and when he has made them so, I suppose he’s going to start a society for making the stars in the sky all of the same size. He isn’t serious, though he thinks that he’s the only human being who never trifles; and his machinations, which I believe are for the most part very innocent, are a matter of habit and tradition with him, like his theory that Christopher Columbus, who discovered America, was a Frenchman, and his hot foot-bath on Saturday nights. He has not confessed to me that Hyacinth has taken some secret engagement to do something for the cause which may have nasty consequences, but the way he turns off the idea makes me almost as uncomfortable as if he had. He and his wife are very sweet on Hyacinth, but they can’t make up their minds to interfere; perhaps for them, indeed, as for me, there is no way in which interference can be effective. Only I didn’t put him up to those devil’s tricks — or, rather, I did, originally! The finer the work, I suppose, the higher the privilege of doing it; yet the Poupins heave socialistic sighs over the boy, and their peace of mind evidently isn’t all that it ought to be, if they have given him a noble opportunity. I have appealed to them, to a lively tune, and they have assured me that every hair of his head is as precious to them as if he were their own child. That doesn’t comfort me much, however, for the simple reason that I believe the old woman (whose grandmother, in Paris, in the Revolution, must certainly have carried bloody heads on a pike) would be quite capable of chopping up her own child, if it would do any harm to proprietors. Besides, they say, what influence have they on Hyacinth any more? He is a deplorable little backslider; he worships false gods. In short, they will give me no information, and I dare say

they themselves are tied up by some unholy vow. They may be afraid of a vengeance if they tell tales. It's all sad rubbish, but rubbish may be a strong motive."

The Princess listened attentively, following her visitor with patience. "Don't speak to me of the French; I have never liked them."

"That's awkward, if you 're a socialist. You are likely to meet them."

"Why do you call me a socialist? I hate labels and tickets," she declared. Then she added, "What is it you suppose on Mr. Robinson's part? — for you must suppose something."

"Well, that he may have drawn some accursed lot, to do some idiotic thing — something in which even he himself doesn't believe."

"I haven't an idea of what sort of thing you mean. But, if he doesn't believe in it, he can easily let it alone."

"Do you think he's a customer who will back out of an engagement?" the fiddler asked.

The Princess hesitated a moment. "One can never judge of people, in that way, until they are tested." The next thing, she inquired, "Haven't you even taken the trouble to question him?"

"What would be the use? He would tell me nothing. It would be like a man giving notice when he is going to fight a duel."

The Princess sat for some moments in thought; then she looked up at Mr. Vetch with a pitying, indulgent smile. "I am sure you are worrying about a mere shadow; but that never prevents, does it? I still don't see exactly how I can help you."

"Do you want him to commit some atrocity, some crime?" the old man murmured.

"My dear sir, I don't want him to do anything in all the wide world. I have not had the smallest connection with any arrangement of any kind, that he may have entered into. Do me the honor to trust me," the Princess went on, with a certain dryness of tone. "I don't know what I have done to deprive myself of your confidence. Trust the young man a little, too. He is a gentleman, and he will behave like a gentleman."

The fiddler rose from his chair, smoothing his hat, silently, with the cuff of his coat. Then he stood there, whimsical and piteous, as if the sense that he had still something to urge mingled with that of his having received his dismissal, and both of them were tinged with the oddity of another idea. "That's exactly what I am afraid of!" he exclaimed. Then he added, continuing to look at her, "But he must be very fond of life."

The Princess took no notice of the insinuation contained in these words, and indeed it was of a sufficiently impalpable character. "Leave him to me — leave him to me. I am sorry for your anxiety, but it was very good of you to come to see me. That has been interesting, because you have been one of our friend's influences."

"Unfortunately, yes! If it had not been for me, he would not have known Poupin; and if he hadn't known Poupin, he wouldn't have known his chemical friend — what's his name? Muniment."

"And has that done him harm, do you think?" the Princess asked. She had got up.

"Surely: that fellow has been the main source of his infection."

"I lose patience with you," said the Princess, turning away.

And indeed her visitor's persistence was irritating. He went on, lingering, with his head thrust forward and his short arms out at his sides, terminating in his hat and umbrella, which he held grotesquely, as if they were intended for emphasis or illustration. "I have supposed for a long time that it was either Muniment or you that had got him into his scrape. It was you I suspected most — much the most; but if it isn't you, it must be he."

"You had better go to him, then!"

"Of course I will go to him. I scarcely know him — I have seen him but once — but I will speak my mind."

The Princess rang for her maid to usher the fiddler out, but at the moment he laid his hand on the door of the room she checked him with a quick gesture. "Now that I think of it, don't go to Mr. Muniment. It will be better to leave him quiet. Leave him to me," she added, smiling.

"Why not, why not?" he pleaded. And as she could not tell him on the instant why not, he asked, "Doesn't he know?"

"No, he doesn't know; he has nothing to do with it." She suddenly found herself desiring to protect Paul Muniment from the imputation that was in Mr. Vetch's mind — the imputation of an ugly responsibility; and though she was not a person who took the trouble to tell fibs, this repudiation, on his behalf, issued from her lips before she could check it. It was a result of the same desire, though it was also an inconsequence, that she added, "Don't do that — you'll spoil everything!" She went to him, suddenly eager, and herself opened the door for him. "Leave him to me — leave him to me," she continued, persuasively, while the fiddler, gazing at her, dazzled and submissive, allowed himself to be wafted away. A thought that excited her had come to her with a bound, and after she had heard the house-door close behind Mr. Vetch she walked up and down the room half an hour, restlessly, under the possession of it.

Chapter XXXVIII

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HYACINTH FOUND, this winter, considerable occupation for his odd hours, his evenings and holidays, and scraps of leisure, in putting in hand the books which he had promised himself, at Medley, to inclose in covers

worthy of the high station and splendor of the lady of his life (these brilliant attributes had not then been shuffled out of sight), and of the confidence and generosity she showed him. He had determined she should receive from him something of value, and took pleasure in thinking that after he was gone they would be passed from hand to hand as specimens of rare work, while connoisseurs bent their heads over them, smiling and murmuring, handling them delicately. His invention stirred itself, and he had a hundred admirable ideas, many of which he sat up late at night to execute. He used all his skill, and by this time his skill was of a very high order. Old Crookenden recognized it by raising the rates at which he was paid; and though it was not among the traditions of the proprietor of the establishment in Soho, who to the end wore the apron with his workmen, to scatter sweet speeches, Hyacinth learned, accidentally, that several books that he had given him to do had been carried off and placed on a shelf of treasures at the villa, where they were exhibited to the members of the Crookenden circle who came to tea on Sundays. Hyacinth himself, indeed, was included in this company on a great occasion — invited to a musical party, where he made the acquaintance of half a dozen Miss Crookendens, an acquaintance which consisted in his standing in a corner behind several broad-backed old ladies, and watching the rotation, at the piano and the harp, of three or four of his master's thick-fingered daughters. "You know it's a tremendously musical house," said one of the old ladies to another (she called it "'ouse "); but the principal impression made upon him by the performance of the Miss Crookendens was that it was wonderfully different from the Princess's playing.

He knew that he was the only young man from the shop who had been invited, not counting the foreman, who was sixty years old, and wore a wig so curly that it was in itself a qualification for festive scenes, besides being accompanied by a little frightened, furtive wife, who closed her eyes, as if in the presence of a blinding splendor, when Mrs. Crookenden spoke to her. The Poupins were not there — which, however, was not a surprise to Hyacinth, who knew that (even if they had been asked, which they were not) they had objections of principle to putting their feet chea les bourgeois. They were not asked, because, in spite of the place Eustace had made for himself in the prosperity of the business, it had come to be known that his wife was somehow not his wife (though she was certainly no one's else); and the evidence of this irregularity was conceived to reside, vaguely, in the fact that she had never been seen save in a camisole. There had doubtless been an apprehension that if she had come to the villa she would not have come with the proper number of hooks and eyes, though Hyacinth, on two or three occasions, notably the night he took the pair to Mr. Vetch's theatre, had been witness of the pro portions to which she could reduce her figure when she wished to give the impression of a lawful tie.

It was not clear to him how the distinction conferred upon him became known in Soho, where, however, it excited no sharpness of jealousy — Grugan, Roker, and Hotchkin being hardly more likely to envy a person condemned to spend a genteel evening than they were to envy a monkey performing antics on a barrel organ: both forms of effort indicated an urbanity painfully acquired. But Roker took his young comrade's breath half away with his elbow, and remarked that he supposed he saw the old man had spotted him for one of the darlings at home; inquiring, furthermore, what would become, in that case, of the little thing he took to France, the one to whom he had stood champagne and lobster. This was the first allusion Hyacinth had heard made to the idea that he might some day marry his master's daughter, like the virtuous apprentice of tradition; but the suggestion, somehow, was not inspiring, even when he had thought of an incident or two which gave color to it. None of the Miss Crookendens spoke to him — they all had large faces, and short legs, and a comical resemblance to that stentorous elderly male, their father, and, unlike the Miss Marchants, at Medley, they knew who he was — but their mother, who had on her head the plumage of a cockatoo, mingled with a structure of glass beads, looked at him with an almost awful fixedness, and asked him three distinct times if he would have a glass of negus.

He had much difficulty in getting his books from the Princess; for when he reminded her of the promise she had given him at Medley to make over to him as many volumes as he should require, she answered that everything was changed since then, that she was completely depouillee, that she had now no pretension to have a library, and that, in fine, he had much better leave the matter alone. He was welcome to any books that were in the house, but, as he could see for himself, these were cheap editions, on which it would be foolish to expend such work as his. He asked Madame Grandoni to help him — to tell him, at least, whether there were not some good volumes among the things the Princess had sent to be warehoused; it being known to him, through casual admissions of her own, that she had allowed her maid to save certain articles from the wreck, and pack them away at the Pantechnicon. This had all been Assunta's work, the woman had begged so hard for a few reservations — a loaf of bread for their old days; but the Princess herself had washed her hands of the business. "Chi, chi, there are boxes, I am sure, in that place, with a little of everything," said the old lady, in answer to his inquiry; and Hyacinth conferred with Assunta, who took a sympathetic, talkative, Italian interest in his undertaking, and promised to fish out for him whatever worthy volumes should remain. She came to his lodging, one evening, in a cab, with an armful of pretty books, and when he asked her where they had come from waved her forefinger in front of her nose, in a manner both mysterious and expressive. He brought each volume to the Princess, as it was finished; but her manner. of receiving it was to shake her head over it with a kind, sad smile. "It's beautiful, I am sure, but I have lost my sense for such things. Besides, you must always remember what you once told me, that a woman, even the most cultivated, is incapable of feeling the difference between a bad binding and a good. I remember your once saying that fine ladies had brought

shoemaker's bindings to your shop, and wished them imitated. Certainly, those are not the differences I most feel. My dear fellow, such things have ceased to speak to me; they are doubtless charming, but they leave me cold. What will you have? One can't serve God and mammon." Her thoughts were fixed on far other matters than the delight of dainty covers, and she evidently considered that in caring so much for them Hyacinth resembled the mad emperor who fiddled in the flames of Rome. European society, to her mind, was in flames, and no frivolous occupation could give the measure of the emotion with which she watched them. It produced occasionally demonstrations of hilarity, of joy and hope, but these always took some form connected with the life of the people. It was the people she had gone to see, when she accompanied Hyacinth to a music hall in the Edgeware Road; and all her excursions and pastimes, this winter, were prompted by her interest in the classes on whose behalf the revolution was to be wrought.

To ask himself whether she were in earnest was now an old story to him, and, indeed, the conviction he might arrive at on this head had ceased to have any practical relevancy. It was just as she was, superficial or profound, that she held him, and she was, at any rate, sufficiently animated by a purpose for her actions to have consequences, actual and possible. Some of these might be serious, even if she herself were not, and there were times when Hyacinth was much visited by the apprehension -of them. On the Sundays that she had gone with him into the darkest places, the most fetid holes, in London, she had always taken money with her, in considerable quantities, and always left it behind. She said, very naturally, that one couldn't go and stare at people, for an impression, without paying them, and she gave alms right and left, indiscriminately, without inquiry or judgment, as simply as the abbess of some beggar-haunted convent, or a Lady Bountiful of the superstitious, unscientific ages who should have hoped to be assisted to heaven by her doles. Hyacinth never said to her, though he sometimes thought it, that since she was so full of the modern spirit, her charity should be administered according to the modern lights, the principles of economical science; partly because she was not a woman to be directed and regulated, she could take other people's ideas, but she could never take their way. Besides, what did it matter? To himself, what did it matter to-day whether he were drawn into right methods or into wrong ones, his time being too short for regret or for cheer? The Princess was an embodied passion — she was not a system; and her behavior, after all, was more addressed to relieving herself than to relieving others. And then misery was sown so thick in her path that wherever her money was dropped it fell into some trembling palm. He wondered that she should still have so much cash to dispose of, until she explained to him that she came by it through putting her personal expenditure on a rigid footing. What she gave away was her savings, the margin she had succeeded in creating; and now that she had tasted of the satisfaction of making little hoards for such a purpose, she regarded her other years, with their idleness and waste, their merely personal motives, as a long, stupid sleep of the conscience. To do something for others was not only so much more human, but so much more amusing!

She made strange acquaintances, under Hyacinth's conduct; she listened to extraordinary stories, and formed theories about them, and about the persons who narrated them to her, which were often still more extraordinary. She took romantic fancies to vagabonds of either sex, attempted to establish social relations with them, and was the cause of infinite agitation to the gentleman who lived near her in the Crescent, who was always smoking at the window, and who reminded Hyacinth of Mr. Micawber. She received visits that were a scandal to the Crescent, and Hyacinth neglected his affairs, whatever they were, to see what tatterdemalion would next turn up at her door. This intercourse, it is true, took a more fruitful form as her intimacy with Lady Aurora deepened; her ladyship practiced discriminations which she brought the Princess to recognize, and before the winter was over Hyacinth's services in the slums were found unnecessary. He gave way with relief, with delight, to Lady Aurora, for he had not in the least understood his behavior for the previous four months, nor taken himself seriously as a cicerone. He had plunged into a sea of barbarism without having any civilizing energy to put forth. He was conscious that the people were miserable — more conscious, it often seemed to him, than they themselves were; so frequently was he struck with their brutal insensibility, a grossness impervious to the taste of better things or to any desire for them. He knew it so well that the repetition of contact could add no vividness to the conviction; it rather smothered and befogged his impression, peopled it with contradictions and difficulties, a violence of reaction, a sense of the inevitable and insurmountable. In these hours the poverty and ignorance of the multitude seemed so vast and preponderant, and so much the law of life, that those who had managed to escape from the black gulf were only the happy few, people of resource as well as children of luck; they inspired in some degree the interest and sympathy that one should feel for survivors and victors, those who have come safely out of a shipwreck or a battle. What was most in Hyacinth's mind was the idea, of which every pulsation of the general life of his time was a syllable, that the flood of democracy was rising over the world; that it would sweep all the traditions of the past before it; that, whatever it might fail to bring, it would at least carry in its bosom a magnificent energy; and that it might be trusted to look after its own. When democracy should have its way everywhere, it would be its fault (whose else?) if want and suffering and crime should continue to be ingredients of the human lot. With his mixed, divided nature, his conflicting sympathies, his eternal habit of swinging from one view to another, Hyacinth regarded this prospect in different moods, with different kinds of emotion. In spite of the example Eustache Poupin gave him of the reconcilement of disparities, he was afraid the democracy wouldn't care for perfect bindings or for the finest sort of conversation. The Princess gave up these things in proportion as she advanced in the direction she had so audaciously chosen; and if the Princess could give them up, it would take

very extraordinary natures to stick to them. At the same time there was joy, exultation, in the thought of surrendering one's self to the wave of revolt; of floating in the tremendous tide, of feeling one's self lifted and tossed, carried higher on the sun-touched crests of billows than one could ever be by a dry, lonely effort of one's own. That vision could deepen to a kind of ecstasy; make it indifferent whether one's ultimate fate, in such a heaving sea, were not almost certainly to be submerged in bottomless depths or dashed to pieces on resisting cliffs. Hyacinth felt that, whether his personal sympathy should rest finally with the victors or the vanquished, the victorious force was colossal, and would require no testimony from the irresolute.

The reader will doubtless smile at his mental debates and oscillations, and not understand why a little bastard bookbinder should attach importance to his conclusions. They were not important for either cause, but they were important for himself, if only because they would rescue him from the torment of his present life, the perpetual laceration of the rebound. There was no peace for him between the two currents that flowed in his nature, the blood of his passionate, plebeian mother and that of his long-descended, super-civilized sire. They continued to toss him from one side to the other; they arrayed him in intolerable defiances and revenges against himself. He had a high ambition: he wanted neither more nor less than to get hold of the truth and wear it in his heart. He believed, with the candor of youth, that it was brilliant and clear-cut, like a royal diamond; but in whatever direction he turned in the effort to find it, he seemed to know that behind him, bent on him in reproach, was a tragic, wounded face. The thought of his mother had filled him, originally, with the vague, clumsy fermentation of his first impulses toward social criticism; but since the problem had become more complex by the fact that many things in the world as it was constituted grew intensely dear to him, he had tried more and more to construct some conceivable and human countenance for his father — some expression of honor, of tenderness and recognition, of unmerited suffering, or at least of adequate expiation. To desert one of these presences for the other — that idea had a kind of shame in it, as an act of treachery would have had; for he could almost hear the voice of his father ask him if it were the conduct of a gentleman to take up the opinions and emulate the crudities of fanatics and cads. He had got over thinking that it would not have become his father to talk of what was proper to gentlemen, and making the mental reflection that from him, at least, the biggest cad in London could not have deserved less consideration. He had worked himself round to allowances, to interpretations, to such hypotheses as the evidence in the Times, read in the British Museum on that never-to-be-forgotten afternoon, did not exclude; though they had been frequent enough, and too frequent, his hours of hot resentment against the man who had attached to him the stigma he was to carry forever, he threw himself, in other conditions, and with a certain success, into the effort to find condonations, excuses, for him. It was comparatively easy for him to accept himself as the son of a terribly light Frenchwoman; there seemed a deeper obloquy even than that in his having for his other parent a nobleman altogether wanting in nobleness. He was too poor to afford it. Sometimes, in his imagination, he sacrificed one to the other, throwing over Lord Frederick much the oftener; sometimes, when the theory failed that his father would have done great things for him if he had lived, or the assumption broke down that he had been Florentine Vivier's only lover, he cursed and disowned them alike; sometimes he arrived at conceptions which presented them side by side, looking at him with eyes infinitely sad, but quite unashamed — eyes which seemed to tell him that they had been hideously unfortunate, but had not been base. Of course his worst moments now, as they had always been the worst, were those in which his grounds for thinking that Lord Frederick had really been his father perversely, cynically, fell away from him. It must be added that they always passed, for the mixture that he felt himself, so tormentingly, so insolubly, to be could be accounted for in no other manner.

I allude to these divagations not because they belong in an especial degree to the history of our young man during the winter of the Princess's residence in Madeira Crescent, but because they were a constant element in his moral life, and need to be remembered in any view of him at a given time. There were nights of November and December, as he trod the greasy pavements that lay between Westminster and Paddington, groping his way through the baffled lamplight and tasting the smoke - seasoned fog, when there was more happiness in his heart than he had ever known. The influence of his permeating London had closed over him again; Paris and Milan and Venice had shimmered away into picture and reminiscence; and as the great city which was most his own lay round him under her pall, like an immeasurable breathing monster, he felt, with a vague excitement, as he had felt before, only now with more knowledge, that it was the richest expression of the life of man. His horizon had been immensely widened, but it was filled, again, by the expanse that sent dim night-gleams and strange blurred reflections and emanations into a sky without stars. He suspended, as it were, his small sensibility in the midst of it, and it quivered there with joy and hope and ambition, as well as with the effort of renunciation. The Princess's quiet fireside glowed with deeper assurances, with associations of intimacy, through the dusk and the immensity; the thought of it was with him always, and his relations with the mistress of it were more organized than they had been in his first vision of her. Whether or no it was better for the cause she cherished that she should have been reduced to her present simplicity, it was better, at least, for Hyacinth. It made her more near and him more free; and if there had been a danger of her nature seeming really to take the tone of the vulgar things about her, he would only have had to remember her as she was at Medley to restore the perspective. In truth, her beauty always appeared to have the setting that best became it; her fairness made the element in which she lived, and, among the meanest accessories, constituted a kind of splendor. Nature had multiplied the difficulties in the way of her successfully representing herself as having

properties in common with the horrible populace of London. Hyacinth used to smile at this pretension in his night-walks to Paddington, or homeward; the populace of London were scattered upon his path, and he asked himself by what wizardry they could ever be raised to high participations. There were nights when every one he met appeared to reek with gin and filth, and he found himself elbowed by figures as foul as lepers. Some of the women and girls, in particular, were appalling — saturated with alcohol and vice, brutal, bedraggled, obscene. “What remedy but another deluge, what alchemy but annihilation?” he asked himself, as he went his way; and he wondered what fate there could be, in the great scheme of things, for a planet overgrown with such vermin, what fate but to be hurled against a ball of consuming fire. If it was the fault of the rich, as Paul Muniment held, the selfish, congested rich, who allowed such abominations to flourish, that made no difference, and only shifted the shame; for the terrestrial globe, a visible failure, produced the cause as well as the effect.

It did not occur to Hyacinth that the Princess had withdrawn her confidence from him because, for the work of investigating still further the condition of the poor, she placed herself in the hands of Lady Aurora. He could have no jealousy of the noble spinster; he had too much respect for her philanthropy, the thoroughness of her knowledge, and her capacity to answer any question it could come into the Princess’s extemporizing head to ask, and too acute a consciousness of his own desultory and superficial attitude toward the great question. It was enough for him that the little parlor in Madeira Crescent was a spot round which his thoughts could revolve, and toward which his steps could direct themselves, with an unalloyed sense of security and privilege. The picture of it hung before him half the time, in colors to which the feeling of the place gave a rarity that doubtless did not literally characteristic the scene. His relations with the Princess had long since ceased to appear to him to belong to the world of fable; they were as natural as anything else (everything in life was queer enough); he had by this time assimilated them, as it were, and they were an indispensable part of the happiness of each. “Of each” — Hyacinth risked that, for there was no particular vanity now involved in his perceiving that the most remarkable woman in Europe was, simply, very fond of him. The quiet, familiar, fraternal welcome he found on the nasty winter nights was proof enough of that. They sat together like very old friends, whom long pauses, during which they simply looked at each other with kind, acquainted eyes, could not make uncomfortable. Not that the element of silence was the principal part of their conversation, for it interposed only when they had talked a great deal. Hyacinth, on the opposite side of the fire, felt at times almost as if he were married to his hostess, so many things were taken for granted between them. For intercourse of that sort, intimate, easy, humorous, circumscribed by drawn curtains and shaded lamplight, and interfused with domestic embarrassments and confidences, all turning to the jocular, the Princess was incomparable. It was her theory of her present existence that she was picnicking; but all the accidents of the business were happy accidents. There was a household quietude in her steps and gestures, in the way she sat, in the way she listened, in the way she played with the cat, or looked after the fire, or folded Madame Grandoni’s ubiquitous shawl; above all, in the inveteracy with which she spent her evenings at home, never dining out nor going to parties, ignorant of the dissipations of the town. There was something in the isolation of the room, when the kettle was on the hob, and he had given his wet umbrella to the maid, and the Princess made him sit in a certain place near the fire, the better to dry his shoes — there was something that evoked the idea of the vie de province, as he had read about it in French works. The French term came to him because it represented more the especial note of the Princess’s company, the cultivation, the facility of talk. She expressed herself often in the French tongue itself; she could borrow that convenience, for certain shades of meaning, though she had told Hyacinth that she didn’t like the people to whom it was native. Certainly, the quality of her conversation was not provincial; it was singularly free and unrestricted; there was nothing one mightn’t say to her, or that she was not liable to say herself. She had cast off prejudices, and gave no heed to conventional danger-posts. Hyacinth admired the movement — his eyes seemed to see it — with which in any direction, intellectually, she could fling open her windows. There was an extraordinary charm in this mixture of liberty and humility — in seeing a creature capable, socially, of immeasurable flights sit dovelike, with folded wings.

The young man met Lady Aurora several times in Madeira Crescent (her days, like his own, were filled with work, and she came in the evening), and he knew that her friendship with the Princess had arrived at a rich maturity. The two ladies were a source of almost rapturous interest to each other, and each rejoiced that the other was not a bit different. The Princess prophesied freely that her visitor would give her up — all nice people did, very soon; but to Hyacinth the end of her ladyship’s almost breathless enthusiasm was not yet in view. She was bewildered, but she was fascinated; and she thought the Princess not only the most distinguished, the most startling, the most edifying, and the most original person in the world, but the most amusing and the most delightful to have tea with. As for the Princess, her sentiment about Lady Aurora was the same that Hyacinth’s had been: she thought her a saint, the first she had ever seen, and the purest specimen conceivable; as good in her way as St. Francis of Assisi, as tender and naive and transparent, of a spirit of charity as sublime. She held that when one met a human flower as fresh as that in the dusty ways of the world, one should pluck it and wear it; and she was always inhaling Lady Aurora’s fragrance, always kissing her and holding her hand. The spinster was frightened at her generosity, at the way her imagination embroidered; she wanted to convince her (as the Princess did on her own side) that such exaggerations destroyed their unfortunate subject. The Princess delighted in her clothes, in the way she put them on and

wore them, in the economies she practiced in order to have money for charity and the ingenuity with which these slender resources were made to go far, in the very manner in which she spoke, a kind of startled simplicity. She wished to emulate her in all these particulars; to learn how to economize still more cunningly, to get her bonnets at the same shop, to care as little for the fit of her gloves; to ask, in the same tone, “Isn’t it a bore Susan Crotty’s husband has got a ticket of leave?” She said Lady Aurora made her feel like a French milliner, and that if there was anything in the world she loathed it was a French milliner. Each of these persons was powerfully affected by the other’s idiosyncrasies, and each wanted the other to remain as she was, while she herself should be transformed into the image of her friend.

One evening, going to Madeira Crescent a little later than usual, Hyacinth met Lady Aurora on the doorstep, leaving the house. She had a different air from any he had seen in her before; appeared flushed and even a little agitated, as if she had been learning a piece of bad news. She said, “Oh, how do you do?” with her customary quick, vague laugh; but she went her way, without stopping to talk.

Hyacinth, on going in, mentioned to the Princess that he had encountered her, and this lady replied, “It’s a pity you didn’t come a little sooner. You would have assisted at a scene.”

“At a scene?” Hyacinth repeated, not understanding what violence could have taken place between mutual adorers.

“She made me a scene of tears, of most earnest remonstrance — perfectly well meant, I needn’t tell you. She thinks I am going too far.”

“I imagine you tell her things that you don’t tell me,” said Hyacinth.

“Oh, you, my dear fellow!” the Princess murmured. She spoke absentmindedly, as if she were thinking of what had passed with Lady Aurora, and as if the futility of telling things to Hyacinth had become a commonplace.

There was no annoyance for him in this, his pretension to keep pace with her “views” being quite extinct. The tone they now, for the most part, took with each other was one of mutual derision, of shrugging commiseration for insanity on the one hand and benightedness on the other. In discussing with her, he exaggerated deliberately, went to fantastic lengths in the way of reaction; and it was their habit and their entertainment to hurl all manner of denunciation at each other’s head. They had given up serious discussion altogether, and when they were not engaged in bandying, in the spirit of burlesque, the amenities I have mentioned, they talked of matters as to which it could not occur to them to differ. There were evenings when the Princess did nothing but relate her life and all that she had seen of humanity, from her earliest years, in a variety of countries. If the evil side of it appeared mainly to have been presented to her view, this did not diminish the interest and vividness of her reminiscences, nor her power, the greatest Hyacinth had ever encountered, of sketchy, fresh evocation and portraiture. She was irreverent and invidious, but she made him hang on her lips; and when she regaled him with anecdotes of foreign courts (he delighted to know how sovereigns lived and conversed), there was often, for hours together, nothing to indicate that she would have liked to get into a conspiracy, and that he would have liked to get out of one. Nevertheless, his mind was by no means exempt from wonder as to what she was really doing in the dark, and in what queer consequences she might find herself landed. When he questioned her she wished to know by what title, with his sentiments, he pretended to inquire. He did so but little, not being himself altogether convinced of the validity of his warrant; but on one occasion, when she challenged him, he replied, smiling and hesitating, “Well, I must say, it seems to me that, from what I have told you, it ought to strike you that I have a title.”

“You mean your engagement, your promise? Oh, that will never come to anything.”

“Why won’t it come to anything?”

“It’s too absurd, it’s too vague. It’s like some silly humbug in a novel.”

“Vous me rendez la vie,” said Hyacinth theatrically.

“You won’t have to do it,” the Princess went on.

“I think you mean I won’t do it. I have offered, at least; isn’t that a title?”

“Well, then, you won’t do it,” said the Princess; and they looked at each other a couple of minutes in silence.

“You will, I think, at the pace you are going,” the young man resumed.

“What do you know about the pace? You are not worthy to know,” the Princess rejoined.

He did know, however; that is, he knew that she was in communication with foreign socialists, and had, or believed that she had, irons on the fire, that she held in her hand some of the strings that are pulled in great movements.

She received letters that made Madame Grandoni watch her askance, of which, though she knew nothing of their contents, and had only her general suspicions and her scent for disaster, now become constant, the old woman had spoken more than once to Hyacinth. Madame Grandoni had begun to have sombre visions of the interference of the police: she was haunted with the idea of a search for compromising papers; of being dragged, herself, as an accomplice in direful plots, into a court of justice, and possibly into a prison. “If she would only burn — if she would only burn! But she keeps — I know she keeps!” she groaned to Hyacinth, in her helpless gloom. Hyacinth could only guess what it might be that she kept; asking himself whether she were seriously entangled, were being exploited by revolutionary Bohemians, predatory adventurers who counted on her getting frightened at a given moment, and offering hush-money to be allowed to slip out (out of a

complicity which they, of course, would never have taken seriously); or were merely coquetting with paper schemes, giving herself cheap sensations, discussing preliminaries which, for her, could have no second stage. It would have been easy for Hyacinth to smile at the Princess's impression that she was in it, and to conclude that even the cleverest women do not know when they are superficial, had not the vibration remained which had been imparted to his nerves two years before, of which he had spoken to his hostess at Medley — the sense, vividly kindled and never quenched, that the forces secretly arrayed against the present social order were pervasive and universal, in the air one breathed, in the ground one trod, in the hand of an acquaintance that one might touch, or the eye of a stranger that might rest a moment upon one's own. They were above, below, within, without, in every contact and combination of life; and it was no disproof of them to say it was too odd that they should lurk in a particular improbable form. To lurk in improbable forms was precisely their strength, and they would doubtless exhibit much stranger incidents than this of the Princess's being a genuine participant even when she flattered herself that she was.

"You do go too far," Hyacinth said to her, the evening Lady Aurora had passed him at the door.

To which she answered, "Of course I do — that's exactly what I mean. How else does one know one has gone far enough? That poor, dear woman! She's an angel, but she isn't in the least in it," she added, in a moment. She would give him no further satisfaction on the subject; when he pressed her she inquired whether he had brought the copy of Browning that he had promised the last time. If he had, he was to sit down and read it to her. In such a case as this Hyacinth had no disposition to insist; he was glad enough not to talk about the everlasting nightmare. He took Men and Women from his pocket, and read aloud for half an hour; but on his making some remark on one of the poems, at the end of this time, he perceived the Princess had been paying no attention. When he charged her with this levity, she only replied, looking at him musingly, "How can one, after all, go too far? That's a word of cowards."

"Do you mean her ladyship is a coward?"

"Yes, in not having the courage of her opinions, of her conclusions. The way the English can go halfway to a thing, and then stick in the middle!" the Princess exclaimed, impatiently.

"That's not your fault, certainly!" said Hyacinth. "But it seems to me that Lady Aurora, for herself, goes pretty far."

"We are all afraid of some things, and brave about others," the Princess went on.

"The thing Lady Aurora is most afraid of is the Princess Casamassima," Hyacinth remarked.

His companion looked at him, but she did not take this up. "There is one particular in which she would be very brave. She would marry her friend — your friend — Mr. Muniment."

"Marry him, do you think?"

"What else, pray?" the Princess asked. "She adores the ground he walks on."

"And what would Belgrave Square, and Inglefield, and all the rest of it, say?"

"What do they say already, and how much does it make her swerve? She would do it in a moment; and it would be fine to see it, it would be magnificent," said the Princess, kindling, as she was apt to kindle, at the idea of any great freedom of action.

"That certainly wouldn't be a case of what you call sticking in the middle," Hyacinth rejoined.

"Ah, it wouldn't be a matter of logic; it would be a matter of passion. When it's a question of that, the English, to do them justice, don't stick."

This speculation of the Princess's was by no means new to Hyacinth, and he had not thought it heroic, after all, that their highstrung friend should feel herself capable of sacrificing her family, her name, and the few habits of gentility that survived in her life, of making herself a scandal, a fable, and a nine days' wonder, for Muniment's sake; the young chemist's assistant being, to his mind, as we know, exactly the type of man who produced convulsions, made ruptures and renunciations easy. But it was less clear to him what ideas Muniment might have on the subject of a union with a young woman who should have come out of her class for him. He would marry some day, evidently, because he would do all the natural, human, productive things; but for the present he had business on hand which would be likely to pass first. Besides — Hyacinth had seen him give evidence of this — he didn't think people could really come out of their class; he held that the stamp of one's origin is ineffaceable, and that the best thing one could do was to wear it and fight for it. Hyacinth could easily imagine how it would put him out to be mixed up, closely, with a person who, like Lady Aurora, was fighting on the wrong side. "She can't marry him unless he asks her, I suppose — and perhaps he won't," he reflected.

"Yes, perhaps he won't," said the Princess, thoughtfully.

Chapter XXXIX

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ON SATURDAY AFTERNOONS Paul Muniment was able to leave his work at four o'clock, and on one of these occasions, some time after his visit to Madeira Crescent, he came into Rosy's room at about five, carefully dressed and brushed, and ruddy with the freshness of an abundant washing. He stood at the foot of her sofa,

with a conscious smile, knowing how she chaffed him when his necktie was new; and after a moment, during which she ceased singing to herself, as she twisted the strands of her long black hair together and let her eyes travel over his whole person, inspecting every detail, she said to him, “My dear Mr. Muniment, you are going to see the Princess.”

“Well, have you anything to say against it?” Mr. Muniment asked.

“Not a word; you know I like princesses. But you have.”

“Well, my girl, I’ll not speak it to you,” the young man rejoined. “There’s something to be said against everything, if you’ll give yourself trouble enough.”

“I should be very sorry if ever anything was said against you.”

“The man’s a sneak who is only and always praised,” Muniment remarked. “If you didn’t hope to be finely abused, where would be the encouragement?”

“Ay, but not with reason,” said Rosy, who always brightened to an argument.

“The better the reason, the greater the incentive to expose one’s self. However, you won’t hear it, if people do heave bricks at me.”

“I won’t hear it? Pray, don’t I hear everything? I should like any one to keep anything from me!” And Miss Muniment gave a toss of her recumbent head.

“There’s a good deal I keep from you, my dear,” said Paul, rather dryly.

“You mean there are things I don’t want, I don’t take any trouble, to know. Indeed and indeed there are: things that I wouldn’t know for the world — that no amount of persuasion would induce me, not if you was to go down on your knees. But if I did — if I did, I promise you that just as I lie here I should have them all in my pocket. Now there are others,” the young woman went on— “there are others that you will just be so good as to tell me. When the Princess asked you to come and see her you refused, and you wanted to know what good it would do. I hoped you would go, then; I should have liked you to go, because I wanted to know how she lived, and whether she had things handsome, or only in the poor way she said. But I didn’t push you, because I couldn’t have told you what good it would do you: that was only the good it would have done me. At present I have heard everything from Lady Aurora, and I know that it’s all quite decent and tidy (though not really like a princess, a bit), and that she knows how to turn everything about and put it best end foremost, just as I do, like, though I oughtn’t to say it, no doubt. Well, you have been, and more than once, and I have had nothing to do with it; of which I am very glad now, for reasons that you perfectly know — you’re too honest a man to pretend you don’t. Therefore, when I see you going again, I just inquire of you, as you inquired of her, What good does it do you?”

“I like it — I like it, my dear,” said Paul, with his fresh, unembarrassed smile,

“I dare say you do. So should I, in your place. But it’s the first time I have heard you express the idea that we ought to do everything we like.”

“Why not, when it doesn’t hurt any one else?”

“Oh, Mr. Muniment, Mr. Muniment!” Rosy exclaimed, with exaggerated solemnity, holding up a straight, attenuated forefinger at him. Then she added, “No, she doesn’t do you good, that beautiful, brilliant woman.”

“Give her time, my dear — give her time,” said Paul, looking at his watch.

“Of course yon are impatient, but you must hear me. I have no doubt she’ll wait for you; you won’t lose your turn. Please, what would you do if any one was to break down altogether?”

“My bonny lassie,” the young man rejoined, “if you only keep going, I don’t care who fails.”

“Oh, I shall keep going, if it’s only to look after my friends and get justice for them,” said Miss Muniment— “the delicate, sensitive creatures who require support and protection. Have you really forgotten that we have such a one as that?”

The young man walked to the window, with his hands in his pockets, and looked out at the fading light. “Why does she go herself, then, if she doesn’t like her?”

Rose Muniment hesitated a moment. “Well, I’m glad I’m not a man!” she broke out. “I think a woman on her back is cleverer than a man on his two legs. And you such a wonderful one, too!”

“You are all too clever for me, my dear. If she goes — and twenty times a week, too — why shouldn’t I go, once in ever so long? Especially as I like her, and Lady Aurora doesn’t.”

“Lady Aurora doesn’t? Do you think she ‘d be guilty of hypocrisy? Lady Aurora delights in her; she won’t let me say that she herself is fit to dust the Princess’s shoes. I needn’t tell you how she goes down before them she likes. And I don’t believe you care a button; you have got something in your head, some wicked game or other, that you think she can hatch for you.”

At this Paul Muniment turned round and looked at his sister a moment, smiling still and whistling just audibly. “Why shouldn’t I care? Ain’t I soft, ain’t I susceptible?”

“I never thought I should hear you ask that, after what I have seen these four years. For four years she has come, and it’s all for you, as well it might be, and you never showing any more sense of what she ‘d be willing to do for you than if you had been that woolen cat on the hearth rug!”

“What would you like me to do? Would you like me to hang round her neck and hold her hand, the same as you do?” Muniment asked.

“Yes, it would do me good, I can tell you. It’s better than what I see — the poor lady getting clouded over, like a mirror that wants rubbing.”

“You know a good deal, Rosy, but you don’t know everything,” Muniment remarked in a moment, with a face that gave no sign of seeing a reason in what she said. “Your mind is too poetical. There’s nothing that I should care for that her ladyship would be willing to do for me.”

“She would marry you at a day’s notice — she ‘d do that.”

“I shouldn’t care for that. Besides, if I was to ask her, she would never come into the place again. And I shouldn’t care for that, for you.”

“Never mind me; I’ll take the risk!” cried Rosy, gayly.

“But what’s to be gained, if I can have her, for you, without any risk?”

“You won’t have her for me, or for any one, when she’s dead of a broken heart.”

“Dead of a broken tea-cup!” said the young man. “And, pray, what should we live on, when you had got us set up? — the three of us, without counting the kids.”

He evidently was arguing from pure goodnature, and not in the least from curiosity; but his sister replied as eagerly as if he would be floored by her answer: “Hasn’t she got two hundred a year of her own? Don’t I know every penny of her affairs?”

Paul Muniment gave no sign of any mental criticism he may have made on Rosy’s conception of the delicate course, or of a superior policy; perhaps, indeed, for it is perfectly possible, her inquiry did not strike him as having a mixture of motives. He only rejoined, with a little pleasant, patient sigh, “I don’t want the dear old girl’s money.”

His sister, in spite of her eagerness, waited twenty seconds; then she flashed at him, “Pray, do you like the Princess’s better?”

“If I did, there would be more of it,” he answered, quietly.

“How can she marry you? Hasn’t she got a husband?” Rosy cried.

“Lord, how you give me away!” laughed her brother. “Daughters of earls, wives of princes — I have only to pick.”

“I don’t speak of the Princess, so long as there’s a prince. But if you haven’t seen that Lady Aurora is a beautiful, wonderful exception, and quite unlike any one else in all the wide world — well, all I can say is that I have.”

“I thought it was your opinion,” Paul objected, “that the swells should remain swells, and the high ones keep their place.”

“And, pray, would she lose hers if she were to marry you?”

“Her place at Inglefield, certainly,” said Paul, as patiently as if his sister could never tire him with any insistence or any minuteness.

“Hasn’t she lost that already? Does she ever go there?” . “Surely you appear to think so, from the way you always question her about it,” replied Paul.

“Well, they think her so mad already that they can’t think her any madder,” his sister continued. “They have given her up, and if she were to marry you” —

“If she were to marry me, they wouldn’t touch her with a ten - foot pole,” Paul broke in.

Rosy flinched a moment; then she said, serenely, “Oh, I don’t care for that!”

“You ought to, to be consistent, though, possibly, she shouldn’t, admitting that she wouldn’t. You have more imagination than logic — which, of course, for a woman, is quite right. That’s what makes you say that her ladyship is in affliction because I go to a place that she herself goes to without the least compulsion.”

“She goes to keep you off,” said Rosy, with decision.

“To keep me off?”

“To interpose, with the Princess; to be nice to her and conciliate her, so that she may not take you.”

“Did she tell you any such rigmarole as that?” Paul inquired, this time staring a little.

“Do I need to be told things, to know them? I am not a fine, strong, superior maÂ«; therefore I can discover them for myself,” answered Rosy, with a dauntless little laugh and a light in her eyes which might indeed have made it appear that she was capable of wizardry.

“You make her out at once too passionate and too calculating,” the young man rejoined. “She has no personal feelings, she wants nothing for herself. She only wants one thing in the world — to make the poor a little less poor.”

“Precisely; and she regards you, a helpless, blundering bachelor, as one of them.”

“She knows I am not helpless so long as you are about the place, and that my blunders don’t matter so long as you correct them.”

“She wants to assist me to assist you, then!” the girl exclaimed, with the levity with which her earnestness was always interfused; it was a spirit that seemed, at moments, in argument, to mock at her own contention. “Besides, isn’t that the very thing you want to bring about?” she went on. “Isn’t that what you are plotting and working and waiting for? She wants to throw herself into it — to work with you.”

“My dear girl, she doesn’t understand a pennyworth of what I think. She couldn’t if she would.”

“And no more do I, I suppose you mean.”

“ No more do you; but with you it’s different. If you would, you could. However, it matters little who understands and who doesn’t, for there’s mighty little of it. I’m not doing much, you know.”

Rosy lay there looking up at him. “It must be pretty thick, when you talk that way. However, I don’t care

what happens, for I know I shall be looked after."

"Nothing will happen — nothing will happen," Paul remarked, simply.

The girl's rejoinder to this was to say in a moment, "You have a different tone since you have taken up the Princess."

She spoke with a certain severity, but he broke out, as if he had not heard her, "I like your idea of the female aristocracy quarreling over a dirty brute like me."

"I don't know how dirty you are, but I know you smell of soap," said Rosy, with serenity. "They won't quarrel; that's not the way they do it. Yes, you are taking a different tone, for some purpose that I can't discover just yet."

"What do you mean by that? When did I ever take a tone?" her brother asked.

"Why, then, do you speak as if you were not remarkable, immensely remarkable — more remarkable than anything any one, male or female, good or bad, of the aristocracy or of the vulgar sort, can ever do for you?"

"What on earth have I ever done to show it?" Paul demanded.

"Oh, I don't know your secrets, and that's one of them. But we're out of the common beyond any one, you and I, and, between ourselves, with the door fastened, we might as well admit it."

"I admit it for you, with all my heart," said the young man, laughing.

"Well, then, if I admit it for you, that's all that's required."

The brother and sister considered each other a while in silence, as if each were tasting, agreeably, the distinction the other conferred; then Muniment said, "If I'm such an awfully superior chap, why shouldn't I behave in keeping?"

"Oh, you do, you do!"

"All the same, you don't like it."

"It isn't so much what you do; it's what she does."

"How do you mean, what she does?"

"She makes Lady Aurora suffer."

"Oh, I can't go into that," said Paul. "A man feels like a muff, talking about the women that 'suffer' for him."

"Well, if they do it, I think you might bear it!" Rosy exclaimed. "That's what a man is. When it comes to being sorry, oh, that's too ridiculous!"

"There are plenty of things in the world I'm sorry for," Paul rejoined, smiling. "One of them is that you should keep me gossiping here when I want to go out."

"Oh, I don't care if I worry her a little. Does she do it on purpose?" Rosy continued.

"You ladies must settle all that together," Muniment answered, rubbing his hat with the cuff of his coat. It was a new one, the bravest he had ever possessed, and in a moment he put it on his head, as if to reinforce his reminder to his sister that it was time she should release him.

"Well, you do look genteel," she remarked, complacently, gazing up at him. "No wonder she has lost her head! I mean the Princess," she explained. "You never went to any such expense for her ladyship."

"My dear, the Princess is worth it — she's worth it," said the young man, speaking seriously now, and reflectively.

"Will she help you very much?" Rosy demanded, with a strange, sudden transition to eagerness.

"Well," said Paul, "that's rather what I look for."

She threw herself forward on her sofa, with a movement that was rare with her, and shaking her clasped hands she exclaimed, "Then go off, go off quickly!"

He came round and kissed her, as if he were not more struck than usual with her freakish inconsequence. "It's not bad to have a little person at home who wants a fellow to succeed."

"Oh, I know they will look after me," she said, sinking back upon her pillow with an air of agreeable security.

He was aware that whenever she said "they," without further elucidation, she meant the populace surging up in his rear, and he rejoined, always hilarious, "I don't think we'll leave it much to 'them.'"

"No, it's not much you'll leave to them, I'll be bound."

He gave a louder laugh at this, and said, "You're the deepest of the lot, Miss Muniment."

Her eyes kindled at his praise, and as she rested them on her brother's she murmured, "Well, I pity the poor Princess, too, you know."

"Well, now, I'm not conceited, but I don't," Paul returned, passing in front of the little mirror on the mantelshelf.

"Yes, you'll succeed, and so shall I — but she won't," Rosy went on.

Muniment stopped a moment, with his hand on the latch of the door, and said, gravely, almost sententiously, "She is not only beautiful, as beautiful as a picture, but she is uncommon sharp, and she has taking ways, beyond anything that ever was known."

"I know her ways," his sister replied. Then, as he left the room, she called after him, "But I don't care for anything, so long as you become prime minister of England!"

Three quarters of an hour after this Muniment knocked at the door in Madeira Crescent, and was immediately ushered into the parlor, where the Princess, in her bonnet and mantle, sat alone. She made no

movement as he came in; she only looked up at him with a smile.

"You are braver than I gave you credit for," she said, in her rich voice.

"I shall learn to be brave, if I associate a while longer with you. But I shall never cease to be shy," Muniment added, standing there, and looking tall in the middle of the small room. He cast his eyes about him for a place to sit down, but the Princess gave him no help to choose; she only watched him, in silence, from her own place, with her hands quietly folded in her lap. At last, when, without remonstrance from her, he had selected the most uncomfortable chair in the room, she replied —

"That's only another name for desperate courage. I put on my bonnet, on the chance, but I didn't expect you."

"Well, here I am — that's the great thing," Muniment said, good-humoredly.

"Yes, no doubt it's a very great thing. But it will be a still greater thing when you are there."

"I am afraid you hope too much," the young man observed. "Where is it? I don't think you told me."

The Princess drew a small folded letter from her pocket, and, without saying anything, held it out to him. He got up to take it from her, opened it, and, as he read it, remained standing in front of her. Then he went straight to the fire and thrust the paper into it. At this movement she rose quickly, as if to save the document, but the expression of his face, as he turned round to her, made her stop. The smile that came into her own was a little forced. "What are you afraid of?" she asked. "I take it the house is known. If we go, I suppose we may admit that we go."

Muniment's face showed that he had been annoyed, but he answered, quietly enough, "No writing — no writing."

"You are terribly careful," said the Princess.

"Careful of you — yes."

She sank down upon her sofa again, asking her companion to ring for tea; they would do much better to have some before going out. When the order had been given, she remarked, "I see I shall have much less keen emotion than when I acted by myself."

"Is that what you go in for — keen emotion?"

"Surely, Mr. Muniment. Don't you?"

"God forbid! I hope to have as little of it as possible."

"Of course one doesn't want any vague rodomontado; one wants to do something. But it would be hard if one couldn't have a little pleasure by the way."

"My pleasure is in quietness," said Paul Muniment, smiling.

"So is mine. But it depends on how you understand it. Quietness, I mean, in the midst of a tumult."

"You have rare ideas about tumults. They are not good in themselves."

The Princess considered this a moment; then she remarked, "I wonder if you are too prudent. I shouldn't like that. If it is made an accusation against you that you have been — where we are going — shall you deny it?"

"With that prospect, it would be simpler not to go at all, wouldn't it?" Muniment inquired.

"Which prospect do you mean? That of being found out, or that of having to lie?"

"I suppose that if you lie you are not found out," Muniment replied, humorously.

"You won't take me seriously," said the Princess. She spoke without irritation, without resentment, with a kind of resigned sadness. But there was a certain fineness of reproach in the tone in which she added, "I don't believe you want to go at all."

"Why else should I have come, especially if I don't take you seriously?"

"That has never been a reason for a man not going to see a woman," said the Princess. "It's usually a reason in favor of it."

Muniment turned his smiling eyes over the room, looking from one article of furniture to another: this was a way he had when he was engaged in a discussion, and it suggested not so much that he was reflecting on what his interlocutor said as that his thoughts were pursuing a cheerfully independent course. Presently he observed, "I don't know that I quite understand what you mean by that question of taking a woman seriously."

"Ah, you are very perfect," murmured the Princess. "Don't you consider that the changes you look for will be also for our benefit?"

"I don't think they will alter your position."

"If I didn't hope for that, I wouldn't do anything," said the Princess.

"Oh, I have no doubt you'll do a great deal."

The young man's companion was silent for some minutes, during which he also was content to say nothing. "I wonder you can find it in your conscience to work with me," she observed at last.

"It isn't in my conscience I find it," said Muniment, laughing.

The maidservant brought in the tea, and while the Princess was making a place for it on a little table beside her she exclaimed, "Well, I don't care, for I think I have you in my power!"

"You have every one in your power," returned Muniment.

"Every one is no one," the Princess replied, rather dryly; and a moment later she said to him, "That extraordinary little sister of yours — surely you take her seriously?"

"I'm wonderful fond of her, if that's what you mean. But I don't think her position will ever be altered."

“Are you alluding to her position in bed? If you consider that she will never recover her health,” the Princess said, “I am very sorry to hear it.”

“Oh, her health will do. I mean that she will continue to be, like all the most amiable women, just a kind of ornament to life.”

The Princess had already perceived that he pronounced amiable “emiable;” but she had accepted this peculiarity of her visitor in the spirit of imaginative transfigurement in which she had accepted several others. “To your life, of course. She can hardly be said to be an ornament to her own.”

“Her life and mine are all one.”

“She is certainly magnificent,” said the Princess. While he was drinking his tea, she remarked to him that for a revolutionist he was certainly most extraordinary; and he inquired, in answer, whether it were not rather in keeping for revolutionists to be extraordinary. He drank three cups, declaring that his hostess’s decoction was rare; it was better, even, than Lady Aurora’s. This led him to observe, as he put down his third cup, looking round the room again, lovingly, almost covetously, “You’ve got everything so handy, I don’t see what interest you can have.”

“How do you mean, what interest?”

“In getting in so uncommon deep.” On the instant the Princess’s expression flashed into pure passion. “Do you consider that I am in — really far?”

“Up to your neck, ma’am.”

“And do you think that il y va of my neck — I mean that it’s in danger?” she translated, eagerly.

“Oh, I understand your French. Well, I’ll look after you,” Muniment observed.

“Remember, then, definitely, that I expect not to lie.”

“Not even for me?” Then Muniment added, in the same familiar tone, which was not rough nor wanting in respect, but only homely and direct, suggestive of growing acquaintance, “If I was your husband, I would come and take you away.”

“Please don’t speak of my husband,” said the Princess, gravely. “You have no qualification for doing so; you know nothing whatever about him.”

“I know what Hyacinth has told me.”

“‘ Oh, Hyacinth!” the Princess murmured, impatiently. There was another silence of some minutes, not disconnected, apparently, from this reference to the little bookbinder; but when Muniment spoke, after the interval, it was not to carry on the allusion.

“Of course you think me very plain, very rude.”

“Certainly, you have not such a nice address as Hyacinth,” the Princess rejoined, not desiring, on her side, to evade the topic. “But that is given to very few,” she added; “and I don’t know that pretty manners are exactly what we are working for.”

“Ay, it won’t be very endearing when we cut down a few allowances,” said Muniment. “But I want to please you; I want to be as much as possible like Hyacinth,” he went on.

“That is not the way to please me. I don’t forgive him; he’s very silly.”

“Ah, don’t say that; he’s a little brick!” Muniment exclaimed.

“He’s a dear fellow, with extraordinary qualities, but so deplorably conventional.”

“Yes, talking about taking things seriously — he takes them seriously,” remarked Muniment.

“Has he ever told you his life?” asked the Princess.

“He hasn’t required to tell me. I’ve seen a good bit of it.”

“Yes, but I mean before you knew him.”

Muniment reflected a moment. “His birth, and his poor mother? I think it was Rosy told me about that.”

“And, pray, how did she know?”

“Ah, when you come to the way Rosy knows!” said Muniment, laughing. “She doesn’t like people in that predicament. She thinks we ought all to be finely born.”

“Then they agree, for so does poor Hyacinth.” The Princess hesitated an instant; then she said, as if with a quick effort, “I want to ask you something. Have you had a visit from Mr. Vetch?”

“The old gentleman who fiddles? No, he has never done me that honor.”

“It was because I prevented him, then. I told him to leave it to me.”

“To leave what, now?” Muniment looked at her in placid perplexity.

“He is in great distress about Hyacinth — about the danger he runs. You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I know what you mean,” Muniment replied, slowly. “But what does he know about it? I thought it was supposed to be a deadly secret.”

“So it is. He doesn’t know anything; he only suspects.”

“How do you know, then?”

The Princess hesitated again. “Oh, I’m like Rosy — I find out. Mr. Vetch, as I suppose you are aware, has known Hyacinth all his life; he takes a most affectionate interest in him. He believes there is something hanging over him, and he wants it to be turned off, to be stopped.” The Princess paused, at this, but her visitor made no response, and she went on: “He was going to see you, to beg you to do something, to interfere; he seemed to think that your power, in such a matter, would be very great; but, as I tell you, I requested him, as a particular favor to me, to let you alone.”

““What favor would it be to you?” Muniment asked.

“It would give me the satisfaction of feeling that you were not worried.”

Muniment appeared struck with the curious inadequacy of this explanation, considering what was at stake; he broke into a laugh, and remarked, “That was considerate of you, beyond everything.”

“It was not meant as consideration for you; it was a piece of calculation.” The Princess, having made this announcement, gathered up her gloves and turned away, walking to the chimneypiece, where she stood a moment arranging her bonnet-ribbons in the mirror with which it was decorated. Muniment watched her with evident curiosity; in spite both of his inaccessibility to nervous agitation and of the skeptical theories he entertained about her, he was not proof against her general faculty of creating a feeling of suspense, a tension of interest, on the part of those who associated with her. He followed her movements, but, plainly, he didn’t follow her calculations, so that he could only listen more attentively when she inquired suddenly, “Do you know why I asked you to come and see me? Do you know why I went to see your sister? It was all a plan,” said the Princess.

“We hoped it was just an ordinary humane, social impulse,” the young man returned.

“It was humane, it was even social, but it was not ordinary. I wanted to save Hyacinth.”

“To save him?”

“I wanted to be able to talk with you just as I am talking now.”

“That was a fine idea!” Muniment exclaimed, ingenuously.

“I have an exceeding, a quite inexpressible, regard for him. I have no patience with some of his opinions, and that is why I permitted myself to say just now that he is silly. But, after all, the opinions of our friends are not what we love them for, and therefore I don’t see why they should be what we hate them for. Hyacinth Robinson’s nature is singularly generous and his intelligence very fine, though there are some things that he muddles up. You just now expressed strongly your own regard for Mm; therefore we ought to be perfectly agreed. Agreed, I mean, about getting him out of his scrape.”

Muniment had the air of a man who felt that he must consider a little before he assented to these successive propositions; it being a limitation of his intellect that he could not respond without understanding. After a moment he answered, referring to the Princess’s last remark, in which the others appeared to culminate, and at the same time shaking his head a little and smiling, “His scrape isn’t important.”

“You thought it was when you got him into it.”

“I thought it would give him pleasure,” said Muniment.

“That’s not a reason for letting people do what isn’t good for them.”

“I wasn’t thinking so much about what would be good for him as about what would be bad for some others. He can do as he likes.”

“That’s easy to say. They must be persuaded not to call upon him.”

“Persuade them, then, dear madam.”

“How can I persuade them? If I could, I wouldn’t have approached you. I have no influence, and even if I had my motives would be suspected. You are the one to interpose.”

“Shall I tell them he funks it?” Muniment asked.

“He doesn’t — he doesn’t!” exclaimed the Princess.

“On what ground, then, shall I put it?”

“Tell them he has changed his opinions.”

“Wouldn’t that be rather like denouncing him as a traitor, and doing it hypocritically?”

“Tell them, then, it ‘& simply my wish.”

“That won’t do you much good,” Muniment said, with his simple laugh.

“Will it put me in danger? That’s exactly what I want.”

“Yes; but as I understand you, you want to suffer for the people, not by them. You are very fond of Robinson — that’s perfectly natural,” the young man went on. “But you ought to remember that, in the line you have chosen, our affections, our natural ties, our timidities, our shrinkings” — His voice had become low and grave, and he paused a little, while the Princess’s deep and lovely eyes, attaching themselves to his face, showed that, in an instant, she was affected by this unwonted adjuration. He spoke now as if he were taking her seriously. “All those things are as nothing, and must never weigh a feather beside our service.”

The Princess began to draw on her gloves. “You’re a most extraordinary man.”

“That’s what Rosy tells me.”

“Why don’t you do it yourself?”

“Do Hyacinth’s job? Because it’s better to do my own.”

“And, pray, what is your own?”

“I don’t know,” said Paul Muniment, with perfect serenity and goodnature. “I expect to be instructed.”

“Have you taken an oath, like Hyacinth?”

“Ah, madam, the oaths I take I don’t tell,” said the young man, gravely.

“Oh, you …!” the Princess murmured, with an ambiguous cadence. She appeared to dismiss the question, but to suggest, at the same time, that he was very abnormal. This imputation was further conveyed by the next words, she uttered: “And can you see a dear friend whirled away like that?”

At this, for the first time, Paul Muniment exhibited a certain irritation. “You had better leave my dear

friend to me."

The Princess, with her eyes still fixed upon him, gave a long, soft sigh. "Well, then, shall we go?"

Muniment took up his hat again, but he made no movement toward the door. "If you did me the honor to seek my acquaintance, to ask me to come and see you, only in order to say what you have just said about Hyacinth, perhaps we needn't carry out the form of going to the place you proposed. Wasn't this only your pretext?"

"I believe you are afraid!" the Princess exclaimed; but in spite of her exclamation the pair presently went out of the house. They quitted the door together, after having stood on the step for a moment, looking up and down, apparently for a cab. So far as the darkness, which was now complete, permitted the prospect to be scanned, there was no such vehicle within hail. They turned to the left, and after a walk of several minutes, during which they were engaged in small, dull bystreets, emerged upon a more populous way, where there were lighted shops and omnibuses and the evident chance of a hansom. Here they paused again, and very soon an empty hansom passed, and, at a sign, pulled up near them. Meanwhile, it should be mentioned, they had been followed, at a distance, by a cautious figure, a person who, in Madeira Crescent, when they came out of the house, was stationed on the other side of the street, at a considerable distance. When they appeared he retreated a little, still, however, keeping them in sight. When they moved away he moved in the same direction, watching them, but maintaining his distance. He drew nearer, seemingly because he could not control his eagerness, as they turned into Westbourne Grove, and during the minute they stood there he was exposed to recognition by the Princess if she had happened to turn her head. In the event of her having felt such an impulse, she would have discovered, in the lamplight, that her noble husband was hovering in her rear. But the Princess was otherwise occupied; she failed to see that at one moment he came so close as to suggest that he had an intention of addressing himself to the couple. The reader scarcely needs to be informed that his real intention was to satisfy himself as to the kind of person his wife was walking with. The time allowed him for this inquiry was brief, especially as he had perceived, more rapidly than he sometimes perceived things, that they were looking for a vehicle, and that with its assistance they would pass out of his range — a reflection which caused him to give half his attention to the business of hailing any second cab which should come that way. There are parts of London in which you may never see a cab at all, but there are none in which you may see only a single one; in accordance with which fortunate truth, Prince Casamassima was able to wave his stick to good purpose as soon as the two objects of his pursuit had rattled away. Behind them now, in the gloom, he had no fear of being seen. In little more than an instant he had jumped into another hansom, the driver of which accompanied the usual exclamation of "All right, sir!" with a small, amused grunt, which the Prince thought eminently British, after he had hissed at him, over the hood, expressively, and in a manner by no means indicative of that nationality, the injunction, "Follow, follow, follow!"

Chapter XL

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AN HOUR AFTER THE PRINCESS had left the house with Paul Muniment, Madame Grandoni came down to supper, a meal of which she partook, in gloomy solitude, in the little back parlor. She had pushed away her plate, and sat motionless, staring at the crumpled cloth, with her hands folded on the edge of the table, when she became aware that a gentleman had been ushered into the drawingroom, and was standing before the fire in an attitude of discreet expectancy. At the same moment the maidservant approached the old lady, and remarked, with bated breath, “The Prince, the Prince, mum! It’s you he ‘ave asked for, mum!” Upon this, Madame Grandoni called out to the visitor from her place, addressed him as her poor young friend, and bade him come and give her his arm. He obeyed with solemn alacrity, and conducted her into the front room, near the fire. He helped her to arrange herself in her armchair, and to gather her shawl about her; then he seated himself near her, and remained with his pathetic eyes bent upon her. After a moment she said, “Tell me something about Rome. The grass in the Villa Borghese must already be thick with flowers.”

“I would have brought you some, if I had thought,” he answered. Then he turned his eyes about the room. “Yes, you may well ask, in such a black little hole as this. My wife should not live here,” he added.

“Ah, my dear friend, for all that she’s your wife!” the old woman exclaimed.

The Prince sprang up in sudden, passionate agitation, and then she saw that the rigid quietness with which he had come into the room and greeted her was only an effort of his good manners. He was really trembling with excitement. “It is true — it is true! She has lovers — she has lovers!” he broke out. “I have seen it with my eyes, and I have come here to know!”

“I don’t know what you have seen, but your coming here to know will not have helped you much. Besides, if you have seen, you know for yourself. At any rate, I have ceased to be able to tell you.”

“You are afraid — you are afraid!” cried the visitor, brandishing his arms.

Madame Grandoni looked up at him with slow speculation. “Sit down and be tranquil, very tranquil. I have ceased to pay attention — I take no heed.”

“Well, I do, then,” said the Prince, subsiding a little. “Don’t you know she has gone out to a house, in a horrible quarter, with a man?”

“I think it highly probable, dear Prince.”

“And who is he? That’s what I want to discover.”

“How can I tell you? I haven’t seen him.”

He looked at her a moment, with his distended eyes. “Dear lady, is that kind to me, when I have counted on you?”

“Oh, I am not kind any more; it’s not a question of that. I am angry — as angry, almost, as you.”

“Then why don’t you watch her, eh?”

“It’s not with her I am angry. It’s with myself,” said Madame Grandoni, meditatively.

“For becoming so indifferent, do you mean?”

“On the contrary, for staying in the house.”

“Thank God, you are still here, or I couldn’t have come. But what a lodging for the Princess!” the young man exclaimed. “She might at least live in a manner befitting.”

“Eh, the last time you were in London you thought it was too costly!” she cried.

He hesitated a moment. “Whatever she does is wrong. Is it because it’s so bad that you must go?” he went on.

“It is foolish — foolish — foolish,” said Madame Grandoni, slowly, impressively.

“Foolish, che, che! He was in the house nearly an hour, this one.”

“In the house? In what house?”

“Here, where you sit. I saw him go in, and when he came out it was after a long time, with her.”

“And where were you, meanwhile?”

Again Prince Casamassima hesitated. “I was on the other side of the street. When they came out I followed them. It was more than an hour ago.”

“Was it for that you came to London?”

“I don’t know what I came for. To torment myself.”

“You had better go back to Rome,” said Madame Grandoni.

“Of course I will go back, but if you will tell me who this one is! How can you be ignorant, dear friend, when he comes freely in and out of the house where I have to watch, at the door, for a moment that I can snatch? He was not the same as the other.”

“As the other?”

“Doubtless there are fifty! I mean the little one, whom I met, in the other house, that Sunday afternoon.”

“I sit in my room almost always now,” said the old woman. “I only come down to eat.”

“Dear lady, it would be better if you would sit here,” the Prince remarked.

"Better for whom?"

"I mean that if you did not withdraw yourself you could at least answer my questions."

"Ah, but I have not the slightest desire to answer them," Madame Grandoni replied. "You-must remember that I am not here as your spy."

"No," said the Prince, in a tone of extreme and simple melancholy. "If you had given me more information, I should not have been obliged to come here myself. I arrived in London only this morning, and this evening I spent two hours walking up and down opposite the house, like a groom waiting for his master to come back from his ride. I wanted a personal impression. It was .so that I saw him come in. He is not a gentleman — not even like some of the strange ones here."

"I think he is Scotch," remarked Madame Grandoni.

"Ah, then, you have seen him?"

"No, but I have heard him. He speaks very loud — the floors of this house are not built as we build in Italy — and his voice is the same that I have heard in the people of that country. Besides, she has told me — some things. He is a chemist's assistant."

"A chemist's assistant? Santo Dio! And the other one, a year ago — more than a year ago — was a bookbinder."

"Oh, the bookbinder!" murmured Madame Grandoni.

"And does she associate with no people of good? Has she no other society?"

"For me to tell you more, Prince, you must wait till I am free," said the old lady.

"How do you mean, free?"

"I must choose. I must either go away — and then I can tell you what I have seen — or if I stay here I must hold my tongue."

"But if you go away you will have seen nothing," the Prince objected.

"Ah, plenty as it is — more than I ever expected to."

The Prince clasped his hands together in tremulous suppliance; but at the same time he smiled, as if to conciliate, to corrupt. "Dearest friend, you torment my curiosity. If you will tell me this, I will never ask you anything more. Where did they go? For the love of God, what is that house?"

"I know nothing of their houses," she returned, with an impatient shrug.

"Then there are others — there are many?" She made no answer, but sat brooding, with her chin in her protrusive kerchief. Her visitor presently continued, in a soft, earnest tone, with his beautiful Italian distinctness, as if his lips cut and curved the sound, while his fine fingers quivered into quick, emphasizing gestures: "The street is small and black, but it is like all the streets. It has not importance; it is at the end of an endless imbroglio. They drove for twenty minutes; then they stopped their cab and got out. They went together on foot some minutes more. There were many turns; they seemed to know them well. For me it was very difficult — of course I also got out; I had to stay so far behind — close against the houses. Chiffinch Street, N. E. — that was the name," the Prince continued, pronouncing the word with difficulty; "and the house is No. 32 — I looked at that after they went in. It's a very bad house — worse than this; but it has no sign of a chemist, and there are no shops in the street. They rang the bell — only once, though they waited a long time; it seemed to me, at least, that they did not touch it again. It was several minutes before the door was opened; and that was a bad time for me, because as they stood there they looked up and down. Fortunately you know the air of this place! I saw no light in the house — not even after they went in. Who let them enter, I couldn't tell. I waited nearly half an hour, to see how long they would stay and what they would do on coming out; then, at last, my impatience brought me here, for to know she was absent made me hope I might see you. While I was there, two persons went in — two men, together, smoking, who looked like artisti (I didn't see them near) — but no one came out. I could see they took their cigars — and you can fancy what tobacco! — into the presence of the Princess. Formerly," pursued Madame Grandoni's visitor, with a touching attempt at a humorous treatment of this point, "she never tolerated smoking — never mine, at least. The street is very quiet — very few people pass. Now what is the house? Is it where that man lives?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

He had been encouraged by her consenting, in spite of her first protests, to listen to him — he could see she was listening; and he was still more encouraged when, after a moment, she answered his question by a question of her own: "Did you cross the river to go there? I know that he lives over the water."

"Ah, no, it was not in that part. I tried to ask the cabman who brought me back to explain to me what it is called; but I couldn't make him understand. They have heavy minds," the Prince remarked. Then he went on, drawing a little closer to his hostess: "But what were they doing there? Why did she go with him?"

"They are plotting. Ecco!" said Madame Grandoni.

"You mean a secret society, a band of revolutionists and assassins? Capisco bene, — that is not new to me. But perhaps they only pretend it's for that," added the Prince.

"Only pretend? Why should they pretend? That is not Christina's way."

"There are other possibilities," the Prince observed.

"Oh, of course, when your wife goes away with strange men, in the dark, to faraway houses, you can think anything you like, and I have nothing to say to your thoughts. I have my own, but they are my own affairs, and I shall not undertake to defend Christina, for she is indefensible. When she does the things she does, she

provokes, she invites the worst construction; there let it rest, save for this one remark, which I will content myself with making: If she were a dishonest woman, she would not behave as she does now, she would not expose herself to irresistible interpretations; the appearance of everything would be good and proper. I simply tell you what I believe. If I believed that what she is doing concerned you alone, I should say nothing about it — at least, sitting here. But it concerns others, it concerns every one, so I will open my mouth at last. She has gone to that house to break up society."

"To break it up, yes, as she has wanted before?"

"Oh, more than before. She is very much entangled. She has relations with people who are watched by the police. She has not told me, but I have perceived it by simply living with her."

Prince Casamassima stared. "And is she watched by the police?"

"I can't tell you; it is very possible — except that the police here is not like that of other countries."

" It is more stupid," said the Prince. He gazed at Madame Grandoni with a flush of shame on his face. "Will she bring us to that scandal? It would be the worst of all."

"There is one chance — the chance that she will get tired of it," the old lady remarked. "Only the scandal may come before that."

"Dear friend, she is the devil," said the Prince, solemnly.

"No, she is not the devil, because she wishes to do good."

"What good did she ever wish to do to me?" the Italian demanded, with glowing eyes.

Madame Grandoni shook her head very sadly. "You can do no good, of any kind, to each other. Each on your own side, you must be quiet."

"How can I be quiet when I hear of such infamies?" Prince Casamassima got up, in his violence, and, in a tone which caused his companion to burst into a short, incongruous laugh as soon as she heard the words, exclaimed, "She shall not break up society!"

"No, she will bore herself before the trick is played. Make up your mind to that."

"That is what I expected to find — that the caprice was over. She has passed through so many follies."

"Give her time — give her time," re-. plied Madame Grandoni.

"Time to drag my name into an assize court? Those people are robbers, incendiaries, murderers!"

"You can say nothing to me about them that I haven't said to her."

"And how does she defend herself?"

"Defend herself? Did you ever hear Christina do that?" Madame Grandoni asked. "The only thing she says to me is, 'Don't be afraid; I promise you, by all that's sacred that you sha'n't suffer.' She speaks as if she had it all in her hands. That is very well. No doubt I'm a selfish old woman, but, after all, one has a heart for others."

"And so have I, I think I may pretend," said the Prince. "You tell me to give her time, and it is certain that she will take it, whether I give it or not. But I can at least stop giving her money. By Heaven, it's my duty, as an honest man."

"She tells me that as it is you don't give her much."

"Much, dear lady? It depends on what you call so. It's enough to make all these scoundrels flock around her."

"They are not all scoundrels, any more than she is. That is the strange part of it," said the old woman, with a weary sigh.

"But this fellow, the chemist — tonight — what do you call him?"

"She has spoken to me of him as a most estimable young man."

"But she thinks it's estimable to blow us all up," the Prince returned. "Doesn't he take her money?"

"I don't know what he takes. But there are some things — Heaven forbid one should forget them! The misery of London is something fearful."

"Che vuole? There is misery everywhere," returned the Prince. "It is the will of God. of vuol' pazienza! And in this country does no one give alms?"

"Every one, I believe. But it appears that it is not enough."

The Prince said nothing for a moment; this statement of Madame Grandoni's seemed to present difficulties. The solution, however, soon suggested itself; it was expressed in the inquiry, "What will you have in a country which has not the true faith?"

"Ah, the true faith is a great thing; but there is suffering even in countries that have it."

"Evidentemente. But it helps suffering to be borne, and, later, it makes it up; whereas here! …" said the young man, with a melancholy smile. "If I may speak of myself, it is to me, in my circumstances, a support."

"That is good," said Madame Grandoni.

He stood before her, resting his eyes for a moment on the floor. "And the famous Sholto — Godfrey Gerald — does he come no more?"

"I haven't seen him for months, and know nothing about him."

"He doesn't like the chemists and the bookbinders, eh?" asked the Prince.

"Ah, it was he who first brought them — to gratify your wife."

"If they have turned him out, then, that is very well. Now, if only some one could turn them out!"

"Aspetta, aspetta!" said the old woman.

"That is very good advice, but to follow it isn't amusing." Then the Prince added, "You alluded, just now, as

to something particular, to quel giovane, the young artisan whom I met in the other house. Is he also estimable, or has he paid the penalty of his crimes?"

"He has paid the penalty, but I don't know of what. I have nothing bad to tell you of him, except that I think his star is on the wane."

"Poverino!" the Prince exclaimed.

"That is exactly the manner in which I addressed him the first time I saw him. I didn't know how it would happen, but I felt that it would happen somehow. It has happened through his changing his opinions. He has now the same idea as you — that ci vuol'

The Prince listened with the same expression of wounded eagerness, the same parted lips and excited eyes, to every added fact that dropped from Madame Grandoni's lips. "That, at least, is more honest. Then he doesn't go to Chiffinch Street?"

"I don't know about Chiffinch Street; but it would be my impression that he doesn't go anywhere that Christina and the other one — the Scotchman — go together. But these are delicate matters," the old woman added.

They seemed much to interest her interlocutor. "Do you mean that the Scotchman is — what shall I call it? — his successor?"

For a moment Madame Grandoni made no reply. "I think that this case is different. But I don't understand; it was the other, the little one, that helped her to know the Scotchman."

"And now they have quarreled — about my wife? It is all tremendously edifying!" the Prince exclaimed.

"I can't tell you, and shouldn't have attempted it, only that Assunta talks to me."

"I wish she would talk to me," said the Prince, wistfully.

"Ah, my friend, if Christina were to find you getting at her servants!"

"How could it be worse for me than it is now? However, I don't know why I speak as if I cared, for I don't care any more. I have given her up. It is finished."

"I am glad to hear it," said Madame Grandoni, gravely.

"You yourself made the distinction, perfectly. So long as she endeavored only to injure me, and in my private capacity, I could condone, I could wait, I could hope. But since she has so recklessly thrown herself into the most criminal undertakings, since she lifts her hand with a determined purpose, as you tell me, against the most sacred institutions — it is too much; ah, yes, it is too much. She may go her way; she is no wife of mine. Not another penny of mine shall go into her pocket, and into that of the wretches who prey upon her, who have corrupted her."

"Dear Prince, I think you are right. And yet I am sorry!" sighed the old woman, extending her hand for assistance to rise from her chair. "If she becomes really poor, it will be much more difficult for me to leave her. This is not poverty, and not even a good imitation of it, as she would like it to be. But what will be said of me if, having remained with her through so much of her splendor, I turn away from her the moment she begins to want?"

"Dear lady, do you ask that to make me relent?" the Prince inquired, after an hesitation.

"Not in the least; for whatever is said and whatever you do, there is nothing for me in decency, at present, but to pack my trunk. Judge, by the way I have tattled."

"If you will stay on, she shall have everything." The Prince spoke in a very low tone, with a manner that betrayed the shame he felt at his attempt at bribery.

Madame Grandoni gave him an astonished glance, and moved away from him. "What does that mean? I thought you didn't care."

I know not what explanation of his inconsequence her companion would have given her if, at that moment, the door of the room had not been pushed open, to permit the entrance of Hyacinth Robinson. He stopped short on perceiving that Madame Grandoni had a visitor, but before he had time to say anything the old lady addressed him with a certain curtness: "Ah, you don't fall well; the Princess isn't at home."

"That was mentioned to me, but I ventured to come in to see you, as I have done before," Hyacinth replied. Then he added, as if he were retreating, "I beg many pardons. I was not told that you were not alone."

"My visitor is going, but I am going too," said Madame Grandoni. "I must take myself to my room. I am nervous and very sad. Therefore, kindly excuse me."

Hyacinth had had time to recognize the Prince, and this nobleman paid him the same compliment, as was proved by his asking of Madame Grandoni, in a rapid aside, in Italian, "Isn't it the bookbinder?"

"Siccuro" said the old lady; while Hyacinth, murmuring a regret that he should find her indisposed, turned back to the door.

"One moment — one moment, I pray!" the Prince interposed, raising his hand persuasively, and looking at him with an unexpected, exaggerated smile. "Please introduce me to the gentleman," he added, in English, to Madame Grandoni.

She manifested no surprise at the request — she had none left, apparently, for anything — but pronounced the name of Prince Casamassima, and then added, for Hyacinth's benefit, "He knows who you are."

"Will you permit me to keep you a very little minute?" the Prince continued, addressing the other visitor; after which he remarked to Madame Grandoni, "I will speak with him a little. It is perhaps not necessary that we should incommode you, if you do not wish to stay."

She had for a moment, as she tossed off a satirical little laugh, a return of her ancient drollery: “Remember that if you talk long she may come back. Yes, yes, I will go upstairs. Felicissi-ma notte, signori!” She took her way to the door, which Hyacinth, considerably bewildered, held open for her.

The reasons for which Prince Casamassima wished to converse with him were mysterious; nevertheless, he was about to close the door behind Madame Grandoni, as a sign that he was at the service of her companion. At this moment the latter raised again a courteous, remonstrant hand. “After all, as my visit is finished, and as yours comes to nothing, might we not go out?”

“Certainly, I will go with you,” said Hyacinth. He spoke with an instinctive stiffness, in spite of the Prince’s queer affability, and in spite also of the fact that he felt sorry for the nobleman, to whose countenance Madame Grandoni’s last injunction, uttered in English, had brought a deep and painful blush. It is needless to go into the question of what Hyacinth, face to face with an aggrieved husband, may have had on his conscience, but he assumed, naturally enough, that the situation might be grave, though indeed the Prince’s manner was, for the moment, incongruously conciliatory. Hyacinth invited his new acquaintance to pass, and in a minute they were in the street together.

“Do you go here — do you go’ there?” the Prince inquired, as they stood a moment before the house. “If you will permit, I will take the same direction.” On Hyacinth’s answering that it was indifferent to him the Prince said, turning to the left, “Well, then,, here, but slowly, if that pleases you, and only a little way.” His English was far from perfect, but his errors were mainly errors of pronunciation, and Hyacinth was struck with his effort to express himself very distinctly, so that, in intercourse with a little representative of the British populace, his foreignness should not put him at a disadvantage. Quick as he was to perceive and appreciate, Hyacinth noted how a certain quality of breeding that was in his companion enabled him to compass that coolness, and he mentally applauded his success in a difficult feat. Difficult he judged it, because it seemed to him that the purpose for which the Prince wished to speak to him was one which must require a deal of explanation, and it was a sign of training to explain adequately, in a foreign tongue, especially if one were agitated, to a person in a social position very different from one’s own. Hyacinth knew what the Prince’s estimate of his importance must be (he could have no illusions as to the character of the people his wife received); but while he heard him carefully put one word after the other, he was able to smile to himself at his needless precautions. Hyacinth reflected that at a pinch he could have encountered him in his own tongue; during his stay at Venice he had picked up an Italian vocabulary. “With Madame Grandoni I spoke of you,” the Prince announced, dispassionately, as they walked along. “She told me a thing that interested me,” he added; “that is why I walk with you.” Hyacinth said nothing, deeming that better by silence than in any other fashion he held himself at the disposal of his interlocutor. “She told me you have changed — you have no more the same opinions.”

“The same opinions?”

“About the arrangement of society. You desire no more the assassination of the rich.”

“I never desired any such thing!” said Hyacinth, indignantly.

“Oh, if you have changed, you can confess,” the Prince rejoined, in an encouraging tone. “It is very good for some people to be rich. It would not be right for all to be poor.”

“It would be pleasant if all could be rich,” Hyacinth suggested.

“Yes, but not by stealing and shooting.”

“No, not by stealing and shooting. I never desired that.”

“Ah, no doubt she was mistaken. But to-day you think we must have patience,” the Prince went on, as if he hoped very much that Hyacinth would allow this valuable conviction to be attributed to him. “That is also my thought.”

“Oh, yes, we must have patience,” said Hyacinth, who was now smiling to himself in the dark.

They had by this time reached the end of the little Crescent, where the Prince paused under the street-lamp. He considered Hyacinth’s countenance for a moment by its help, and then he pronounced, “If I am not mistaken, you know very well the Princess.”

Hyacinth hesitated a moment. “She has been very kind to me.”

“She is my wife — perhaps you know.”

Again Hyacinth hesitated, but after a moment he replied, “She has told me that she is married.” As soon as he had spoken these words he thought them idiotic.

“You mean you would not know if she had not told you, I suppose. Evidently, there is nothing to show it. You can think if that is agreeable to me.”

“Oh, I can’t think, I can’t judge,” said Hyacinth.

“You are right — that is impossible.” The Prince stood before his companion, and in the pale gaslight the latter saw more of his face. It had an unnatural expression, a look of wasted anxiety; the eyes seemed to glitter, and Hyacinth conceived the unfortunate nobleman to be feverish and ill. He continued in a moment: “Of course you think it strange — my conversation. I want you to tell me something.”

“I am afraid you are very unwell,” said Hyacinth.

“Yes, I am unwell; but I shall be better if you will tell me. It is because you have come back to good ideas — that is why I ask you.”

A sense that the situation of the Princess’s husband was really pitiful, that at any rate he suffered and was

helpless, that he was a gentleman and even a person who would never have done any great harm — a perception of these appealing truths came into Hyacinth's heart, and stirred there a desire to be kind to him, to render him any service that, in reason, he might ask. It appeared to Hyacinth that he must be pretty sick to ask any service at all, but that was his own affair. "If you would like me to see you safely home, I will do that," our young man remarked; and even while he spoke he was struck with the oddity of his being already on such friendly terms with a person whom he had hitherto supposed to be the worst enemy of the rarest of women. He found himself unable to consider the Prince with resentment.

The nobleman acknowledged the civility of his offer with a slight inclination of his long, attenuated person. "I am very much obliged to you, but I will not go home. I will not go home 'till I know this — to what house she has gone. Will you tell me that?"

"To what house?" Hyacinth repeated.

"She has gone with a person whom you know. Madame Grandoni told me that. He is a Scotch chemist."

"A Scotch chemist?" Hyacinth stared.

"I saw them myself — two hours, three hours, ago. Listen, listen; I will be very clear," said the Prince, laying his forefinger on the other hand with an explanatory gesture. "He came to that house — this one, where we have been, I mean — and stayed there a long time. I was here in the street — I have passed my day in the street! They came out together, and I watched them, I followed them."

Hyacinth had listened with wonder, and even with suspense; the Prince's manner gave an air of such importance, such mystery, to what he had to relate. But at this he broke out: "This is not my business — I can't hear it! I don't watch, /don't follow."

The Prince stared a moment, in surprise; then he rejoined, more quickly than he had spoken yet, "But they went to a house where they conspire, where they prepare horrible acts. How can you like that?"

"How do you know it, sir?" Hyacinth inquired, gravely.

"It is Madame Grandoni who has told me."

"Why, then, do you ask me?"

"Because I am not sure, I don't think she knows. I want to know more, to be sure of what is done in that house. Does she go there only for the revolution," the Prince demanded, "or does she go there to be alone with him?"

"With him?" The Prince's tone and his excited eyes infused a kind of vividness into the suggestion.

"With the tall man — the chemist. They got into a hansom together; the house is far away, in the lost quarters."

Hyacinth drew himself together. "I know nothing about the matter, and I don't care. If that is all you wish to ask me, we had better separate."

The Prince's face elongated; it seemed to grow paler. "Then it is not true that you hate those abominations!"

Hyacinth hesitated a moment. "How can you know about my opinions? How can they interest you?"

The Prince looked at him with dismal eyes; he raised his arms a moment, a certain distance, and then let them drop at his sides. "I hoped you would help me."

"When we are in trouble we can't help each other much!" our young man exclaimed. But this valuable remark was lost upon the Prince, who at the moment Hyacinth spoke had already turned to look in the direction from which they had proceeded, the other end of the Crescent, his attention apparently being called thither by the sound of a rapid hansom. The place was still and empty, and the wheels of this vehicle reverberated. The Prince peered at it, through the darkness, and in an instant he cried, under his breath, excitedly, "They have come back — they have come back! Now you can see — yes, the two!" The hansom had slackened pace and pulled up; the house before which it stopped was clearly the house the two men had lately quitted. Hyacinth felt his arm seized by the Prince, who, hastily, by a strong effort, drew him forward several yards. At this moment a part of the agitation that possessed the unhappy nobleman seemed to pass into his own blood; a wave of anxiety rushed through him — anxiety as to the relations of the two persons who had descended from the cab; he had, in short, for several instants, a very exact revelation of the state of feeling of a jealous husband. If he had been told, half an hour before, that he was capable of surreptitious peepings. in the interest of such jealousy, he would have resented the insult; yet he allowed himself to be checked by his companion just at the nearest point at which they might safely consider the proceedings of the couple who alighted. It was in fact the Princess, accompanied by Paul Muniment. Hyacinth noticed that the latter paid the cabman, who immediately drove away, from his own pocket. He stood with the Princess for some minutes at the door of the house — minutes during which Hyacinth felt his heart beat insanely, ignobly, he couldn't tell why.

"What does he say? what does she say?" hissed the Prince; and when he demanded, the next moment, "Will he go in again, or will he go away?" our sensitive youth felt that a voice was given to his own most eager thought. The pair were talking together, with rapid sequences, and as the door had not yet been opened it was clear that, to prolong the conversation on the steps, the Princess delayed to ring. "It will make three, four, hours he has been with her," moaned the Prince.

"He may be with her fifty hours!" Hyacinth answered, with a laugh, turning away, ashamed of himself.

"He has gone in — sangue di Dio!" cried the Prince, catching his companion again by the arm and making

him look. All that Hyacinth saw was the door just closing; the Princess and Muniment were on the other side of it. “Is that for the revolution?” the trembling nobleman panted. But Hyacinth made no answer; he only gazed at the closed door an instant, and then, disengaging himself, walked straight away, leaving the Prince in the darkness, to direct a great, helpless, futile shake of his stick at the indifferent house.

Chapter XLI

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HYACINTH waited a long time, but when at last Millicent came to the door the splendor of her appearance did much to justify her delay. He heard an immense rustling on the staircase, accompanied by a creaking of that inexpensive structure, and then she brushed forward into the narrow, dusky passage, where he had been standing for a quarter of an hour. She looked flushed; she exhaled a strong, cheap perfume; and she instantly thrust her muff, a tight, fat, beribboned receptacle, at him, to be held while she adjusted her gloves to her large, vulgar hands. Hyacinth opened the door — it was so natural an assumption that they would not be able to talk properly in the passage — and they came out to the low steps, where they stood in the yellow Sunday sunshine. A loud ejaculation on the beauty of the day broke from Millicent, though, as we know, she was not addicted to facile admirations. The winter was not over, but the spring had begun, and the smoky London air allowed the baffled citizens, by way of a change, to see through it. The town could refresh its recollections of the sky, and the sky could ascertain the geographical position of the town. The essential dimness of the low perspectives had by no means disappeared, but it had loosened its folds; it lingered as a blur of mist, interwoven with pretty sun-tints and faint transparencies. There was warmth and there was light, and a view of the shutters of shops, and the church-bells were ringing. Miss Henning remarked that it was a “shime” she couldn’t have a place to ask a gentleman to sit down; but what were you to do when you had such a grind for your living, and a room, to keep yourself tidy, no bigger than a pill-box? She couldn’t, herself, abide waiting outside; she knew something about it when she took things home to ladies to choose (the time they spent was long enough to choose a husband!), and it always made her feel quite miserable. It was something cruel. If she could have what she liked, she knew what she would have; and she hinted at a mystic bower, where a visitor could sit and enjoy himself — with the morning paper, or a nice view out of the window, or something like that — so that, in an adjacent apartment, she could dress without getting in a fidget, which always made her red in the face.

“I don’t know how I ‘ave pitched on my things,” she remarked, presenting her magnificence to Hyacinth, who became aware that she had put a small, plump book into her muff. He explained that, the day being so fine, he had come to propose to her to take a walk with him, in the manner of ancient times. They might spend an hour or two in the Park, and stroll beside the Serpentine, or even paddle about on it, if she liked, and watch the lambkins, or feed the ducks, if she would put a crust in her pocket. The prospect of paddling Miss Henning entirely declined; she had no idea of wetting her flounces, and she left those rough pleasures, especially of a Sunday, to a lower class of young woman. But she didn’t mind if she did go for a turn, though he didn’t deserve any such favor, after the way he hadn’t been near her, if she had died in her garret. She was not one that was to be dropped and taken up at any man’s convenience; she didn’t keep a shop, where you could come in only if you wanted something. Millicent expressed the belief that if the day had not been so lovely she should have sent Hyacinth about his business; it was lucky for him that she was always forgiving (such was her sensitive, generous nature) when the sun was out. Only there was one thing — she couldn’t abide making no difference for Sunday; it was her personal habit to go to church, and she should have it on her conscience if she gave it up for a lark. Hyacinth had already been impressed, more than once, at the manner in which his blooming friend stickled for the religious observance: of all the queer disparities of her nature, her devotional turn struck him as perhaps the queerest. She held her head erect through the longest and dullest sermon, and came out of the place of worship with her fine face embellished by the publicity of her virtue. She was exasperated by the general secularity of Hyacinth’s behavior, especially taken in conjunction with his general straightness, and was only consoled a little by the fact that if he didn’t drink, or fight, or steal, at least he indulged in unlimited wickedness of opinion — theories as bad as anything that people got ten years for. Hyacinth had not yet revealed to her that his theories had somehow lately come to be held with less tension; an instinct of kindness had forbidden him to deprive her of a grievance which ministered so much to sociability. He had not reflected that she would have been more aggrieved, and consequently more delightful, if her condemnation of his godless-ness had been deprived of confirmatory evidence.

On the present occasion she let him know that she would go for a walk with him if he would first accompany her to church; and it was in vain he represented to her that this proceeding would deprive them of their morning, inasmuch as after church she would have to dine, and in the interval there would be no time left. She replied, with a toss of her head, that she dined when she liked; besides, on Sundays, she had cold fare — it was left out for her; an argument to which Hyacinth had to assent, his ignorance of her domestic economy being complete, thanks to the maidenly mystery, the vagueness of reference and explanation, in which, in spite of great freedom of complaint, perpetual announcements of intended change, impending promotion, and high

bids for her services in other quarters, she had always enshrouded her private affairs. Hyacinth walked by her side to the place of worship she preferred — her choice was made apparently from a large experience; and as they went he remarked that it was a good job he wasn't married to her. Lord, how she would bully him, how she would "squeeze" him, in such a case! The worst of it would be that — such was his amiable, peace-loving nature — he would obey, like a showman's poodle. And pray, whom was a man to obey, asked Millicent, if he was not to obey his wife? She sat up in her pew with a majesty that carried out this idea; she seemed to answer, in her proper person, for the infallibility of the Church of England, and Hyacinth had never felt himself under such distinguished protection. When she was fine there was no one so fine; the Princess Casamassima came back to him, in comparison, as a Bohemian, a spangled adventuress. He had come to see her to-day not for the sake of her austerity (he had had too gloomy a week for that), but for that of her softer side; yet now that she treated him to the severer spectacle it struck him, for the moment, as really grand sport — a kind of magnification of her rich vitality. She had her phases and caprices, like the Princess herself; and if they were not the same as those of the lady of Madeira Crescent, they proved, at least, that she was as brave a woman. No one but a capital girl could give herself such airs; she would have a consciousness of the large reserve of amiability required for making up for them. The Princess wished to destroy society, and Millicent wished to uphold it; and as Hyacinth, by the side of his childhood's friend, listened to practiced intonings, he was obliged to recognize the liberality of a fate which had sometimes appeared invidious. He had been provided with the best opportunities for choosing between the beauty of the conventional and the beauty of the original.

Fortunately, on this particular Sunday, there was no sermon (fortunately, I mean, from the point of view of Hyacinth's heretical impatience), so that after the congregation dispersed there was still plenty of time for a walk in the Park. Our friends traversed that barely interrupted expanse of irrepressible herbage which stretches from the Bird-Cage Walk to Hyde Park Corner, and took their way to Kensington Gardens, beside the Serpentine. Once Millicent's devotions were over for the day (she as rigidly abstained from repeating them in the afternoon as she made a point of the first service), once she had lifted her voice in prayer and praise, she changed her allure; moving to a different measure, uttering her sentiments in a high, free manner, and not minding that it should be perceived that she had on her very best gown, and was out, if need be, for the day. She was mainly engaged, for some time, in overhauling Hyacinth for his long absence, demanding some account of what he had been "up to." He listened to her philosophically, liking and enjoying her chaff, which seemed to him, oddly enough, wholesome and refreshing, and absolutely declining to satisfy her. He remarked, as he had had occasion to do before, that if he asked no explanations of her the least he had a right to expect in return was that she should let him off as easily; and even the indignation with which she received this plea did not make him feel that an eclaircissement between them could be a serious thing. There was nothing to explain, and nothing to forgive; they were a pair of very fallible individuals, who were united much more by their weaknesses than by any consistency or fidelity that they might pretend to practice toward each other. It was an old acquaintance — the oldest thing, to-day, except Mr. Vetch's friendship, in Hyacinth's life; and strange as this may appear, it inspired our young man with a kind of indulgent piety. The probability that Millicent "kept company" with other men had quite ceased to torment his imagination; it was no longer necessary to his happiness to be certain about it in order that he might dismiss her from his mind. He could be as happy without it as with it, and he felt a new modesty in regard to prying into her affairs. He was so little in a position to be stern with her that her assumption that he recognized a right on her own part to chide him seemed to him only a part of her perpetual clumsiness — a clumsiness that was not soothing, but was, nevertheless, in its rich spontaneity, one of the things he liked her for.

"If you have come to see me only to make jokes at my expense, you had better have stayed away altogether," she said, with dignity, as they came out of the Green Park. "In the first place it's rude, in the second place it's silly, and in the third place I see through you."

"My dear Millicent, the motions you go through, the resentment you profess, is purely perfunctory," her companion replied. "But it doesn't matter; go on — say anything you like. I came to see you for recreation, for a little entertainment without effort of my own. I scarcely ventured to hope, however, that you would make me laugh — 1 have been so dismal for a long time. In fact, I am dismal still. I wish I had your disposition! My mirth is feverish."

"The first thing I require of any friend is that he should respect me," Miss Henning announced. "You lead a bad life. I know what to think about that," she continued irrelevantly.

"And is it out of respect for you that you wish me to lead a better one? To-day, then, is so much saved out of my wickedness. Let us get on the grass," Hyacinth continued; "it is innocent and pastoral to feel it under one's feet. It's jolly to be with you; you understand everything."

"I don't understand everything you say, but I understand everything you hide," the young woman returned, as the great central expanse of Hyde Park, looking intensely green and browsable, stretched away before them.

"Then I shall soon become a mystery to you, for I mean, from this time forth, to cease to seek safety in concealment. You'll know nothing about me then, for it will be all under your nose."

"Well, there's nothing so pretty as nature," Millicent observed, surveying the smutty sheep who find pasturage in the fields that extend from Knightsbridge to the Bayswater Road. "What will you do when you're so bad you can't go to the shop?" she added, with a sudden transition. And when he asked why he should ever be so bad as that, she said she could see he was in a fever; she hadn't noticed it at first, because he never had

had any more complexion than a cheese. Was it something he had caught in some of those back slums, where he went prying about with his wicked ideas? It served him right, for taking as little good into such places as ever came out of them. Would his fine friends — a precious lot they were, that put it off on him to do all the nasty part! — would they find the doctor, and the port wine, and the money, and all the rest, when he was laid up perhaps for months, through their putting such rubbish into his head, and his putting it into others that could carry it even less? Millicent stopped on the grass, in the watery sunshine, and bent on her companion an eye in which he perceived, freshly, an awakened curiosity, a friendly, reckless ray, a pledge of substantial comradeship. Suddenly she exclaimed, quitting the tone of exaggerated derision which she had used a moment before, “You little rascal, you’ve got something on your heart! Has your Princess given you the sack?”

“My poor girl, your talk is a queer mixture,” Hyacinth murmured. “But it may well be. It is not queerer than my life.”

“Well, I’m glad you admit that!” the young woman cried, walking on with a flutter of her ribbons.

“Your ideas about my ideas!” Hyacinth continued. “Yes, you should see me in the back slums. I’m a bigger Philistine than you, Miss Henning.”

“You’ve got more ridiculous names, if that’s what you mean. I don’t believe that half the time you know what you do mean, yourself. I don’t believe you even know, with all your thinking, what you do think. That’s your disease.”

“It’s astonishing how you sometimes put your finger on the place,” Hyacinth rejoined. “I mean to think no more — I mean to give it up. -Avoid it yourself, my dear Millicent — avoid it as you would a baleful vice. It confers no true happiness. Let us live in the world of irreflective contemplation — let us live in the present hour.”

“I don’t care how I live, nor where I live,” said Millicent, “so long as I can do as I like. It’s them that are over you — it’s them that cut it fine. But you never were really satisfactory to me — not as one friend should be to another,” she pursued, reverting irresistibly to the concrete, and turning still upon her companion that fine fairness which had no cause to shrink from a daylight exhibition. “Do you remember that day I came back to Lomax Place, ever so long ago, and called on poor dear Miss Pynsent (she couldn’t abide me; she didn’t like my form), and waited till you came in, and went out for a walk with you, and had tea at a coffee-shop? Well, I don’t mind telling you that you weren’t satisfactory to me then, and that I consider myself remarkably goodnatured, ever since, to have kept you so little up to the mark. You always tried to carry it off as if you were telling one everything, and you never told one nothing at all.”

“What is it you want me to tell, my dear child?” Hyacinth inquired, putting his hand into her arm. “I’ll tell you anything you like.”

“I dare say, you’ll tell me a lot of trash! Certainly, I tried kindness,” Miss Henning declared.

“Try it again; don’t give it up,” said her companion, strolling along with her in close association.

She stopped short, detaching herself, though not with intention. “Well, then, has she — has she chucked you over?”

Hyacinth turned his eyes away; he looked at the green expanse, faintly misty in the sunshine, dotted with Sun-dayfied figures which made it seem larger; at the wooded boundary of the Park, beyond the grassy moat of Kensington Gardens; at a shining reach of the Serpentine on one side, and the far fa9ades of Bayswater, brightened by the fine weather and the privilege of their view, on the other. “Well, you know I rather think so,” he replied, in a moment.

“Ah, the nasty brute!” cried Millicent, as they resumed their walk.

Upwards of an hour later they were sitting under the great trees of Kensington Gardens, those scattered over the slope which rises gently from the side of the water most distant from the old red palace. They had taken possession of a couple of the chairs placed there for the convenience of that part of the public for which a penny is not, as the French say, an affair, and Millicent, of whom such speculations were highly characteristic, had devoted considerable conjecture to the question whether the individual charged with collecting the said penny would omit to come and ask for his fee. Miss Henning liked to enjoy her pleasures gratis, as well as to see others do so, and even that of sitting in a penny chair could touch her more deeply in proportion as she might feel that nothing would be paid for it. The man came round, however, and after that her pleasure could only take the form of sitting as long as possible, to recover her money. This question had been settled, and two or three others, of a much weightier kind, had come up. At the moment we again participate in the conversation of the pair Millicent was leaning forward, earnest and attentive, with her hands clasped in her lap and her multitudinous silver bracelets tumbled forward upon her wrists. Her face, with its parted lips and eyes clouded to gentleness, wore an expression which Hyacinth had never seen there before, and which caused him to say to her, “After all, dear Milly, you ‘re a good old fellow!”

“Why did you never tell me before — years ago?” she asked.

“It’s always soon enough to commit an imbecility! I don’t know why I tell you to-day, sitting here in a charming place, in balmy air, amid pleasing suggestions, without any reason or practical end. The story is hideous, and I have held my tongue for so long! It would have been an effort, an impossible effort, at any time, to do otherwise. Somehow, to-day it hasn’t been an effort; and indeed I have spoken just because the air is sweet, and the place ornamental, and the day a holiday, and your company exhilarating. These circumstances have had the effect that an object has if you plunge it into a cup of water — the water overflows. Only in my

case it ‘a not water, but a very foul liquid indeed. Excuse the bad odor!”

There had been a flush of excitement in Millicent’s face while she listened to what had gone before; it lingered there, and as a color heightened by emotion is never unbecoming to a handsome woman, it enriched her exceptional expression. “I wouldn’t have boon so rough with you,” she presently remarked.

“My dear lass, this isn’t rough!” her companion exclaimed.

“You ‘re all of a tremble.” She put out her hand and laid it on his own, as if she had been a nurse feeling his pulse.

“Very likely. I’m a nervous little beast,” said Hyacinth.

“Any one would be nervous, to think of anything so awful. And when it’s yourself!” And the girl’s manner represented the dreadfulness of such a contingency. “You require sympathy,” she added, in a tone that made Hyacinth smile; the words sounded like a medical prescription.

“A tablespoonful every half hour,” be rejoined, keeping her hand, which she was about to draw away.

“You would have been nicer, too,” Millicent went on.

“How do you mean, I would have been nicer?”

“Well, I like you now,” said Miss Henning. And this time she drew away her hand, as if, after such a speech, to recover her dignity.

“It’s a pity I have always been so terribly under the influence of women,” Hyacinth murmured, folding his arms.

He was surprised at the delicacy with which Millicent replied: “You must remember that they have a great deal to make up to you.”

“Do you mean for my mother? Ah, she would have made it up, if they had let her! But the sex in general have been very nice to me,” he continued. “It’s wonderful, the kindness they have shown me, and the amount of pleasure I have derived from their society.”

It would perhaps be inquiring too nicely to consider whether this reference to sources of consolation other than those that sprang from her own bosom had an irritating effect on Millicent; at all events, after a moment’s silence, she answered it by asking, “Does she know — your abominable Princess?”

“Yes, but she doesn’t mind it.”

“That’s most uncommonly kind of her!” cried the girl, with a scornful laugh.

“It annoys me very much to hear you apply invidious epithets to her. You know nothing about her.”

“How do you know what I know, please?” Millicent asked this question with the habit of her natural pugnacity, but the next instant she dropped her voice, as if she remembered that she was in the presence of a great misfortune. “Hasn’t she treated you most shamefully, and you such a regular dear?”

“Not in the least. It is I that, as you may say, have rounded on hers. She made my acquaintance because I was interested in the same things as she was. Her interest has continued, has increased, but mine, for some reason or other, has declimed. She has been consistent, and I have been fickle.”

“Your interest has declined, in the Princess?” Millicent questioned, following imperfectly this somewhat complicated statement.

“Oh, dear, no. I mean only in some views that I used to have.”

“Ay, when you thought everything should go to the lowest! That’s a good job!” Miss Henning exclaimed, with an indulgent laugh, as if, after all, Hyacinth’s views and the changes in his views were not what was most important. “And your grand lady still holds for the costermongers!”

“She wants to take hold of the great question of material misery; she wants to do something to make that misery less. I don’t care for her means, I don’t like her processes. But when I think of what there is to be done, and of the courage and devotion of those that set themselves to do it, it seems to me sometimes that with my reserves and scruples I ‘in a very poor creature.”

“You are a poor creature — to sit there and put such accusation on yourself!” the girl flashed out. “If you haven’t a spirit for yourself, I promise you I’ve got one for you! If she hasn’t chucked you over, why in the name of common sense did you say just now that she has? And why is your dear old face as white as my stocking?”

Hyacinth looked at her awhile without answering, as if he took a placid pleasure in her violence. “I don’t know — I don’t understand.”

She put out her hand and took possession of his own; for a minute she held it, as if she wished to check herself, finding some influence in his touch that would help her. They sat in silence, looking at the ornamental water and the landscape gardening beyond, which was reflected in it; until Millicent turned her eyes again upon her companion, and remarked, “Well, that’s the way I ‘d have served him, too!”

It took him a moment to perceive that she was alluding to the vengeance wrought upon Lord Frederick. “Don’t speak of that; you’ll never again hear a word about it on my lips. It’s all darkness.”

“I always knew you were a gentleman,” the girl went on.

“A queer variety, caret mia” her companion rejoined, not very candidly, as we know the theories he himself had cultivated on this point. “Of course you had heard poor Pinnie’s incurable indiscretions. They used to exasperate me when she was alive, but I forgive her now. It’s time I should, when I begin to talk myself. I think I’m breaking up.”

“Oh, it wasn’t Miss Pynsent; it was just yourself.”

"Pray, what did I ever say, in those days?"

"It wasn't what you said," Millicent answered, with refinement. "I guessed the whole business — except, of course, what she got her time for, and you being taken to that deathbed — that day I came back to the Place. Couldn't you see I was turning it over? And did I ever throw it up at you, whatever high words we might have had? Therefore what I say now is no more than I thought then; it only makes you nicer."

She was crude, she was common, she even had the vice of unskillful exaggeration, for he himself honestly could not understand how the situation he had described could make him nicer. But when the faculty of affection that was in her rose, as it were, to the surface, it diffused a sense of rest, almost of protection, deepening, at any rate, the luxury of the balmy holiday, the interlude and the grind of the week's work; so that, though neither of them had dined, Hyacinth would have been delighted to sit with her there the whole afternoon. It seemed a pause in something bitter that was happening to him, making it stop awhile or pushing it off to a distance. His thoughts hovered about that with a pertinacity of which they themselves were weary; but they regarded it now with a kind of wounded indifference. It would be too much, no doubt, to say that Millicent's society appeared a compensation, but it seemed at least a resource. She too, evidently, was highly content; she made no proposal to retrace their steps. She interrogated him about his father's family,, and whether they were going to let him go on like that always, without ever holding out so much as a little finger to him; and she declared, in a manner that was meant to gratify him by the indignation it conveyed, though the awkwardness of the turn made him smile, that if she were one of them she couldn't "abear" the thought of a relation of hers being in such a poor way. Hyacinth already knew what Miss Henning thought of his business at old Crookenden's, and of the perversity of a young man of his parts contenting himself with a career which was after all a mere getting of one's living by one's 'ands. He had to do with books; but so had any shop boy who should carry such articles to the residence of purchasers; and plainly Millicent had never discovered wherein the art he practiced differed from that of a plumber or glazier. He had not forgotten the shock he once administered to her by letting her know that he wore an apron; she looked down on such conditions from the summit of her own intellectual profession, for she wore mantles and jackets and shawls and the long trains of robes exhibited in the window on dummies of wire, and taken down to be transferred to her own undulating person, and had never a scrap to do with making them up, but just with talking about them, and showing them off, and persuading people of their beauty and cheapness. It had been a source of endless comfort to her, in her arduous evolution, that she herself never worked with her 'ands. Hyacinth answered her inquiries, as he had answered his own of old, by asking her what those people owed to the son of a person who had brought murder and mourning into their bright sublimities, and whether she thought he was very highly recommended to them. His question made her reflect for a moment; after which she returned, with the finest spirit, "Well, if your position was so miserable, ain't that all the more reason they should give you a lift? Oh, it 'o something cruel!" she cried; and she added that in his place she would have found a way to bring herself under their notice. She wouldn't have drudged out her life in Soho, if she had had gentlefolks' blood in her veins!" If they had noticed you, they would have liked you," she was so good as to remark; but she immediately remembered, also, that in that case he would have been carried away quite over her head. She was not prepared to say that she would have given him up, little good as she had ever got of him. In that case he would have been thick with real swells, and she emphasized the "real" by way of a thrust at the fine lady of Madeira Crescent — an artifice which was wasted, however, inasmuch as Hyacinth was sure she had extracted from Sholto a tolerably detailed history of the personage in question. Millicent was tender and tenderly sportive, and he was struck with the fact that his base birth really made little impression upon her; she accounted it an accident much less grave than he had been in the habit of doing. She was touched and moved; but what moved her was his story of his mother's dreadful revenge, her long imprisonment, and his childish visit to the jail, with the later discovery of his peculiar footing in the world. These things produced a generous agitation — something the same in kind as the impressions she had occasionally derived from the perusal of the Family Herald. What affected her most, and what she came back to, was the whole element of Lord Frederick and the misery of Hyacinth's having got so little good out of his affiliation to that nobleman. She couldn't get over her friend's not having done something, though her imagination was still vague as to what he might have done. It was the queerest thing in the world, to Hyacinth, to find her apparently assuming that if he had not been so perverse he might have "worked" the whole dark episode as a source of distinction, of glory. She wouldn't have been a nobleman's daughter for nothing! Oh, the left hand was as good as the right; her respectability, for the moment, didn't care for that! His long silence was what most astonished her; it put her out of patience, and there was a strange candor in her wonderment at his not having bragged about his grand relations. They had become vivid and concrete to her now, in comparison with the timid shadows that Pinnie had set into spasmodic circulation. Millicent pumped about in the hushed past of her companion with the oddest mixture of sympathy and criticism, and with good intentions which had the effect of profane voices holloa-ing for echoes.

"Me only — me and her? Certainly, I ought to be obliged, even though it is late in the day. The first time you saw her I suppose you told her — that night you went into her box at the theatre, eh? She 'd have worse to tell you, I'm sure, if she was equally frank. And do you mean to say you never broke it to your big friend in the chemical line?"

"No, we have never talked about it."

"Men are rare creatures!" Millicent cried. "You never so much as mentioned it?"

“It wasn’t necessary. He knew it otherwise — he knew it through his sister.”

“How do you know that, if he never spoke?”

“Oh, because he was jolly good to me,” said Hyacinth.

“Well, I don’t suppose that ruined him,” Miss Henning rejoined. “And how did his sister know it?”

“Oh, I don’t know; she guessed it.”

Millicent stared. “It was none of her business.” Then she added, “He was jolly good to you? Ain’t he good to you now?” She asked this question in her loud, free voice, which rang through the bright stillness of the place.

Hyacinth delayed for a minute to answer her, and when at last he did so it was without looking at her: “I don’t know; I can’t make it out.”

“Well, I can, then!” And Millicent jerked him round toward her, and inspected him with her big bright eyes. “You silly baby, has he been serving you” — She pressed her question upon him; she asked if that was what disagreed with him. His lips gave her no answer, but apparently, after an instant, she found one in his face. “Has he been making up to her ladyship — is that his game?” she broke out. “Do you mean to say she ‘d look at the likes of him?”

“The likes of him? He’s as fine a man as stands!” said Hyacinth. “They have the same views, they are doing the same work.”

“Oh, he hasn’t changed his opinions, then — not like you?”

“No, he knows what he wants; he knows what he thinks.”

“Very much the same work, I’ll be bound!” cried Millicent, in large derision. “He knows what he wants, and I dare say he’ll get it.”

Hyacinth got up, turning away from her; but she also rose, and passed her hand into his arm. “It’s their own business; they can do as they please.”

“Oh, don’t try to be a saint; you put me out of patience!” the girl responded, with characteristic energy. “They ‘re a precious pair, and it would do me good to hear you say so.”

“A man shouldn’t turn against his friends,” Hyacinth went on, with desperate sententiousness.

“That’s for them to remember; there’s no danger of your forgetting it.” They had begun to walk, but she stopped him; she was suddenly smiling at him, and her face was radiant. She went on, with caressing inconsequence: “All that you have told me — it has made you nicer.”

“I don’t see that, but it has certainly made you so. My dear girl, you ‘re a comfort,” Hyacinth added, as they strolled on again.

Chapter XLII

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HYACINTH HAD no intention of going in the evening to Madeira Crescent, and that is why he asked his companion, before they separated, if he might not see her again, after tea. The evenings were bitter to him now, and he feared them in advance. The darkness had become a haunted element; it had visions for him, that passed even before his closed eyes — sharp doubts and fears and suspicions, suggestions of evil, revelations of suffering. He wanted company, to light up his gloom, and this had driven him back to Millicent, in a manner not altogether consistent with the respect which it was still his theory that he owed to his nobler part. He felt no longer free to drop in at the Crescent, and tried to persuade himself, in case his mistrust should be overdone, that his reasons were reasons of magnanimity. If Paul Muniment were seriously occupied with the Princess, if they had work in hand for which their most earnest attention was required (and Sunday was very likely to be the day they would take; they had spent so much of the previous Sunday together), it would be delicate on his part to stay away, to leave his friend a clear field. There was something inexpressibly representative to him in the way that friend had abruptly decided to reenter the house, after pausing outside with its mistress, at the moment he himself stood peering through the fog with the Prince. The movement repeated itself, innumerable times, to his mental vision, suggesting to him things that he couldn’t bear to learn. Hyacinth was afraid of being jealous, even after he had become so, and to prove to himself that he was not he had gone to see the Princess one evening in the middle of the week. Hadn’t he wanted Paul to know her, months and months before, and now was he to entertain a vile feeling at the first manifestation of an intimacy which rested, in each party to it, upon aspirations that he respected? The Princess had not been at home, and he had turned away from the door without asking for Madame Grandoni; he had not forgotten that on the occasion of his previous visit she had excused herself from remaining in the drawingroom. After the little maid in the Crescent had told him the Princess was out, he walked away with a quick curiosity — a curiosity which, if he had listened to it, would have led him to mount upon the first omnibus that traveled in the direction of South Lambeth. Was Paul Muniment, who was such a rare one, in general, for stopping at home of an evening — was he also out, and would Rosy, in this case, be in the humor to mention (for of course she would know) where he had gone? Hyacinth let the omnibus pass, for he suddenly became aware, with a throb of horror, that he was in danger of playing the spy. He had not been near Muniment since, on purpose to leave his curiosity unsatisfied. He allowed himself, however, to notice that the Princess had now not written him a word of

consolation, as she had been so kind as to do once or twice before, when he had knocked at her door without finding her. At present he had missed her twice in succession, and yet she had given no sign of regret — regret even for him. This determined him to stay away awhile longer; it was such a proof that she was absorbingly occupied. Hyacinth's glimpse of the Princess in earnest conversation with Muniment as they returned from the excursion described by the Prince, his memory of Paul's relenting figure crossing the threshold once more, could leave him no doubt as to the degree of that absorption.

Millicent hesitated when Hyacinth proposed to her that they should finish the day together. She smiled, and her handsome eyes rested on his with an air of indulgent interrogation; they seemed to ask whether it were worth her while, in face of his probable incredulity, to mention the real reason why she could not have the pleasure of acceding to his delightful suggestion. Since he would be sure to deride her explanation, would not some trumped-up excuse do as well, since he could knock that about without hurting her? I know not exactly in what sense Miss Henning decided; but she confessed at last that there was an odious obstacle to their meeting again later — a promise she had made to go and see a young lady, the forewoman of her department, who was kept indoors with a bad face, and nothing in life to help her pass the time. She was under a pledge to spend the evening with her, and it was not her way to disappoint an expectation. Hyacinth made no comment on this speech; he received it in silence, looking at the girl gloomily.

"I know what's passing in your mind!" Millicent suddenly broke out. "Why don't you say it at once, and give me a chance to contradict it? I oughtn't to care, but I do care!"

"Stop, stop — don't let us fight!" Hyacinth spoke in a tone of pleading weariness; she had never heard just that accent before.

Millicent considered a moment. "I've a mind to play her false. She is a real lady, highly connected, and the best friend I have — I don't count men," the girl interpolated, smiling— "and there isn't one in the world I'd do such a thing for but you."

"No, keep your promise; don't play any one false," said Hyacinth.

"Well, you are a gentleman!" Miss Henning murmured, with a sweetness that her voice occasionally took.

"Especially" — Hyacinth began; but he suddenly stopped.

"Especially what? Something impudent, I'll engage! Especially as you don't believe me?"

"Oh, no! Don't let's fight!" he repeated.

"Fight, my darling? I'd fight for you!" Miss Henning declared.

Hyacinth offered himself, after tea, the choice between a visit to Lady Aurora and a pilgrimage to Lisson Grove. He was in a little doubt about the former alternative, having an idea that her ladyship's family might have returned to Belgrave Square. He reflected, however, that he could not recognize that as a reason for not going to see her; his relations with her were not clandestine, and she had given him the kindest general invitation. If her unjust relations were at home, she was probably at dinner with them; he would take that risk. He had taken it before, without disastrous results. He was determined not to spend the evening alone, and he would keep the Poupins as a more substantial alternative, in case her ladyship should not be able to receive him.

As soon as the great portal in Belgrave Square was drawn open before him, he perceived that the house was occupied and animated — if the latter term might properly be applied to so severe and stately an establishment. The place was pervaded by subdued light and tall domestics. Hyacinth found himself looking down a kind of colonnade of colossal footmen, an array more imposing even than the retinue of the Princess at Medley. His inquiry died away on his lips, and he stood there struggling with dumbness. It was manifest to him that some high festival was taking place, at which his presence could only be deeply irrelevant; and when a large official, out of livery, bending over him for a voice that faltered, suggested, not unencouragingly, that it might be Lady Aurora he wished to see, he replied in a low, melancholy accent, "Yes, yes, but it can't be possible!" The butler took no pains to controvert this proposition verbally; he merely turned round, with a majestic air of leading the way, and as at the same moment two of the footmen closed the wings of the door behind the visitor Hyacinth judged that it was his cue to follow him. In this manner, after traversing a passage where, in the perfect silence of the servants, he heard the shorter click of his plebeian shoes upon a marble floor, he found himself ushered into a small apartment, lighted by a veiled lamp, which, when he had been left there alone, without further remark on the part of his conductor, he recognized as the scene — only now more amply decorated — of one of his former interviews. 'Lady Aurora kept him waiting a few moments, and then fluttered in with an anxious, incoherent apology. The same transformation had taken place in her own appearance as in the aspect of her parental halls: she had on a light-colored, crumpled-looking, faintly-rustling dress; her head was adorned with a kind of languid plume, terminating in little pink tips; and in her hand she carried a pair of white gloves. All her repressed eagerness was in her face, and she smiled, as if she wished to anticipate any scruples or embarrassments on the part of her visitor; frankly recognizing the brilliancy of her attire and the startling implications it might convey. Hyacinth said to her that, no doubt, on perceiving her family had returned to town, he ought to have backed out; he knew that must make a difference in her life. But he had been marched in, in spite of himself, and now it was clear that he had interrupted her at dinner. She answered that no one who asked for her at any hour was ever turned away; she had managed to arrange that, and she was very happy in her success. She didn't usually dine — there were so many of them, and it took so long. Most of her friends couldn't come at visiting-hours, and it wouldn't be right that she shouldn't ever

receive them. On that occasion she had been dining, but it was all over; she was only sitting there because she was going to a party. Her parents were dining out, and she was just in the drawingroom with some of her sisters. When they were alone it wasn't so long, though it was rather long afterwards, in the dressing-room. It wasn't time yet; the carriage wouldn't come for nearly half an hour. She hadn't been to an evening thing for months and months, but — didn't he know? — one sometimes had to do it. Lady Aurora expressed the idea that one ought to be fair all round, and that one's duties were not all of the same kind; some of them would come up, from time to time, that were quite different from the others. Of course it wasn't just, unless one did all, and that was why she was going to a thing this evening. It was something very small — a sort of family thing, at some of their relations'. Since they had given her that room, for any hour she wanted (it was really tremendously convenient), she had determined to do a party now and then, like a respectable young woman, because it pleased them — though why it should, to see her at a place, was more than she could imagine. She supposed it was because it would perhaps keep some people, a little, from thinking she was mad, and not safe to be at large — which was of course a sort of thing that people didn't like to have thought of their belongings. Lady Aurora explained and expatiated with a kind of nervous superabundance; she talked more continuously than Hyacinth had ever heard her do before, and the young man saw that she was not in her natural equilibrium. He thought it scarcely probable that she was excited by the simple prospect of again dipping into the great world she had forsworn, and he presently perceived that he himself had an agitating effect upon her. His senses were fine enough to make him feel that he revived certain associations and quickened certain wounds. She suddenly stopped talking, and the two sat there looking at each other, in a kind of occult community of suffering. Hyacinth made several mechanical remarks, explaining, insufficiently, why he had come, and in the course of a very few moments, quite independently of these observations, it seemed to him that there was a deeper, a measureless-ly deep, confidence between them. A tacit confession passed and repassed, and each understood the situation of the other. They wouldn't speak of it — it was very definite that they would never do that; for there was something in their common consciousness that was inconsistent with the grossness of accusation. Besides, the grievance of each was an apprehension, an instinct of the soul — not a sharp, definite wrong, supported by proof. It was in the air and in their restless pulses, and not in anything that they could exhibit or complain of. Strange enough it seemed to Hyacinth that the history of each should be the counterpart of that of the other. What had each done but lose that which he or she had never had? Things had gone ill with them; but even if they had gone well, if the Princess had not combined with his friend in that manner which made his heart sink, and produced an effect exactly corresponding upon that of Lady Aurora — even in this case, what would prosperity, what would success, have amounted to? They would have been very barren. He was sure the singular creature before him would never have had a chance to take the unprecedented social step for the sake of which she was ready to go forth from Belgrave Square forever; Hyacinth had judged the smallness of Paul Muniment's appetite for that complication sufficiently to have begun really to pity her ladyship long ago. And now, even when he most felt the sweetness of her sympathy, he might wonder what she could have imagined for him in the event of his not having been supplanted — what security, what completer promotion, what honorable, satisfying sequel. They were unhappy because they were unhappy, and they were right not to rail about that.

"Oh, I like to see you — I like to talk with you," said Lady Aurora, simply. They talked for a quarter of an hour, and he made her such a visit as any gentleman might have made to any lady. They exchanged remarks about the lateness of the spring, about the loan exhibition at Burlington House — which Hyacinth had paid his shilling to see — about the question of opening the museums on Sundays, about the danger of too much coddling legislation on behalf of the working-classes. He declared that it gave him great pleasure to see any sign of her amusing herself; it was unnatural never to do that, and he hoped that now she had taken a turn she would keep it up. At this she looked down, smiling, at her frugal finery, and then she replied, "I dare say I shall begin to go to balls — who knows?"

"That's what our friends in Audley Court think, you know — that it's the worst mistake you can make, not to drink deep of the cup while you have it."

"Oh, I'll do it, then — I'll do it for them 1" Lady Aurora exclaimed. "I dare say that, as regards all that, I haven't listened to them enough." This was the only allusion that passed on the subject of the Muniments.

Hyacinth got up — he had stayed long enough, as she was going out; and as he held out his hand to her she seemed to him a heroine. She would try to cultivate the pleasures of her class if they thought it right — try even to be a woman of fashion, in order to console herself. Paul Muniment didn't care for her, but she was capable of considering that it might be her duty to regulate her life by the very advice that made an abyss between them. Hyacinth didn't believe in the success of this attempt; there passed before his imagination a picture of the poor lady coming home and pulling off her feathers forever, after an evening spent in watching the agitation of a ballroom, from the outer edge of the circle, with a white, elongated face. "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die," he said, laughing.

"Oh, I don't mind dying."

"I think I do," Hyacinth declared, as he turned away. There had been no mention whatever of the Princess.

It was early enough in the evening for him to risk a visit to Lissou Grove; he calculated that the Poupins would still be sitting up. When he reached their house he found this calculation justified; the brilliancy of the light in the window appeared to announce that Madame was holding a salon. He ascended to this apartment

without delay (it was free to a visitor to open the house-door himself), and, having knocked, obeyed the hostess's invitation to come in. Poupin and his wife were seated, with a third person, at a table in the middle of the room, round a staring kerosene lamp, adorned with a globe of clear glass, of which the transparency was mitigated only by a circular pattern of bunches of grapes. The third person was his friend Schinkel, who had been a member of the little party that waited upon Hoffendahl. No one said anything as Hyacinth came in; but, in their silence, the three others got up, looking at him, as he thought, rather strangely.

Book Fifth

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Chapter XLIII

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“MY CHILD, you are always welcome,” said Eustache Poupin, taking Hyacinth’s hand in both his own and holding it for some moments. An impression had come to our young man, immediately, that they were talking about him before he came in, and that they would rather have been left to talk at their ease. He even thought he saw in Poupin’s face the kind of consciousness that comes from detection, or at least interruption, in a nefarious act. With Poupin, however, it was difficult to tell; he always looked so heated and exalted, so like a conspirator defying the approach of justice. Hyacinth’s eyes turned to the others: they were standing as if they had shuffled something on the table out of sight, as if they had been engaged in the manufacture of counterfeit coin. Poupin kept hold of his hand; the Frenchman’s ardent eyes, fixed, unwinking, always expressive of the greatness of the occasion, whatever the occasion was, had never seemed to him to protrude so far from his head. “Ah, my dear friend, nous causions justement de vous” Eustache remarked, as if this were a very extraordinary fact.

“Oh, nous causions — nous causions!” his wife exclaimed, as if to deprecate an indiscreet exaggeration “One may mention a friend, I suppose, in the way of conversation, without taking such a liberty.”

“A cat may look at a king, as your English proverb says,” added Schinkel, jocosely. He smiled so hard at his own pleasantry that his eyes closed up and vanished — an effect which Hyacinth, who had observed it before, thought particularly unbecoming to him, appearing as it did to administer the last perfection to his ugliness. He would have consulted his interests by always looking grave.

“Oh, a king, a king!” murmured Poupin, shaking his head up and down. “That’s what it’s not good to be, au point ou nous en sommes.”

“I just came in to wish you goodnight,” said Hyacinth. “I’m afraid it’s rather late for a call, though Schinkel is here.”

“It’s always too late, my very dear, when you come,” the Frenchman rejoined. “You know if you have a place at our fireside.”

“I esteem it too much to disturb it,” said Hyacinth, smiling, and looking round at the three.

“We can easily sit down again; we are a comfortable party. Put yourself beside me.” And the Frenchman drew a chair close to the one, at the table, that he had just quitted.

“He has had a long walk, he is tired — he will certainly accept a little glass,” Madame Poupin announced with decision, moving toward the tray containing the small gilded liqueur service.

“We will each accept one, ma bonne; it is a very good occasion for a drop of fine,” her husband interposed, while Hyacinth seated himself in the chair his host had designated. Schinkel resumed his place, which was opposite; he looked across at Hyacinth, without speaking, but his long face continued to flatten itself into a representation of mirth. He had on a green coat, which Hyacinth had seen before; it was a garment of ceremony, and such as our young man judged it would have been impossible to procure in London or in any modern time. It was eminently German and of high antiquity, and had a tall, stiff, clumsy collar, which came up to the wearer’s ears and almost concealed his perpetual bandage. When Hyacinth had sat down, Eustache Poupin did not take possession of his own chair, but stood beside him, resting his hand on his head. At that touch something came over Hyacinth, and his heart sprang into his throat. The idea that occurred to him, conveyed in Poupin’s whole manner, as well as in the reassuring intention of that caress and in his wife’s uneasy, instant offer of refreshment, explained the embarrassment of the circle, and reminded our young man of the engagement he had taken with himself to exhibit an extraordinary quietness when a certain crisis in his life should have arrived. It seemed to him that this crisis was in the air, very near — that he should touch it if he made another movement; the pressure of the Frenchman’s hand, which was meant as a solvent, only operated as a warning, As he looked across at Schinkel he felt dizzy and a little sick; for a moment, to his senses, the room whirled round. His resolution to be quiet appeared only too easy to keep; he couldn’t break it even to the extent of speaking. He knew that his voice would tremble, and that is why he made no answer to Schinkel’s rather honeyed words, uttered after an hesitation: “Also, my dear Robinson, have you passed your Sunday well — have you had an ‘appy day?: Why was every one so endearing? His eyes questioned the table, but encountered nothing but its well-wiped surface, polished for so many years by the gustatory elbows of the Frenchman and his wife, and the lady’s dirty pack of cards for “patience” (she had apparently been engaged in this exercise when Schinkel came in), which indeed gave a little the impression of gamblers surprised, who might have shuffled away the stakes. Madame Poupin, who had dived into a cupboard, came back with a bottle of green chartreuse, an apparition which led the German to exclaim, “Lieber Gott, you Vrench, you Vrench, how well you manage! What would you have more?”

The hostess distributed the liquor, but Hyacinth was scarcely able to swallow it, though it was highly appreciated by his companions. His indifference to this luxury excited much discussion and conjecture, the others bandying theories and contradictions, and even ineffectual jokes, about him, over his head, with a volubility which seemed to him unnatural. Poupin and Schinkel professed '. the belief that there must be something very curious the matter with a man who couldn't smack his lips over a drop of that tap; he must either be in love, or have some still more insidious complaint. It was true that Hyacinth was always in love — that was no secret to his friends — and it had never been observed to stop his thirst. The Frenchwoman poured scorn on this view of the case, declaring that the effect of the tender passion was to make one enjoy one's victual (when everything went straight, Men entendu; and how could an ear be deaf to the whisperings of such a dear little bonhomme as Hyacinth?); in proof of which she deposed that she had never eaten and drunk with such relish as at the time — oh, it was far away now — when she had a soft spot in her heart for her rascal of a husband. For Madame Poupin to allude to her husband as a rascal indicated a high degree of conviviality. Hyacinth sat staring at the empty table, with the feeling that he was, somehow, a detached, irresponsible witness of the evolution of his fate. Finally he looked up, and said to his friends, collectively, "What on earth's the matter with you all?" And he followed this inquiry by an invitation that they should tell him what it was they had been saying about him, since they admitted that he had been the subject of their conversation. Madame Poupin answered for them, that they had simply been saying how much they loved him, but that they wouldn't love him any more if he became suspicious and grincheux. She had been telling Mr. Schinkel's fortune on the cards, and she would tell Hyacinth's if he liked. There was nothing much for Mr. Schinkel, only that he would find something, some day, that he had lost, but would probably lose it again, and serve him right if he did! He objected that he had never had anything to lose, and never expected to have; but that was a vain remark, inasmuch as the time was fast coming when every one would have something — though indeed it was to be hoped that he would keep it when he had got it. Eustache rebuked his wife for her levity, reminded her that their young friend cared nothing for old women's tricks, and said he was sure Hyacinth had come to talk over a very different matter — the question (he was so good as to take an interest in it, as he had done in everything that related to them) of the terms which M. Poupin might owe it to himself, to his dignity, to a just though not exaggerated sentiment of his value, to make in accepting Mr. Crookenden's offer of the foremanship of the establishment in Soho; an offer not yet formally enunciated, but visibly in the air, and destined — it would seem, at least — to arrive within a day or two. The old foreman was going to set up for himself. The Frenchman intimated that before accepting any such proposal he must have the most substantial guarantees. "Il me faudrait des conditions tres-particulieres." It was singular to Hyacinth to hear M. Poupin talk so comfortably about these high contingencies, the chasm by which he himself was divided from the future having suddenly doubled its width. His host and hostess sat down on either side of him, and Poupin gave a sketch, in somewhat sombre tints, of the situation in Soho, enumerating certain elements of decomposition which he perceived to be at work there, and which he would not undertake to deal with unless he should be given a completely free hand. Did Schinkel understand, and was that what Schinkel was grinning at? Did Schinkel understand that poor Eustache was the victim of an absurd hallucination, and that there was not the smallest chance of his being invited to assume a lieutenancy? He had less capacity for tackling the British workman to-day than when he began to rub shoulders with him, and Mr. Crookenden had never in his life made a mistake, at least in the use of his tools. Hyacinth's responses were few and mechanical, and he presently ceased to try to look as if he were entering into the Frenchman's ideas.

"You have some news — you have some news about me," he remarked, abruptly, to Schinkel. "You don't like it, you don't like to have to give it to me, and you came to ask our friends here whether they wouldn't help you out with it. But I don't think they will assist you particularly, poor dears! Why do you mind? You oughtn't to mind more than I do. That isn't the way."

"Qu'est-ce qu'il dit — qu'est-ce qu'il dit, le pauvre cheri?" Madame Poupin demanded, eagerly; while Schinkel looked very hard at her husband, as if to ask for direction.

"My dear child, vous vous faites des idees!" the latter exclaimed, laying his hand on him remonstrantly.

But Hyacinth pushed away his chair and got up. "If you have anything to tell me, it is cruel of you to let me see it, as you have done, and yet not to satisfy me."

"Why should I have anything to tell you?" Schinkel asked.

"I don't know that, but I believe you have. I perceive things, I guess things, quickly. That's my nature at all times, and I do it much more now."

"You do it indeed; it is very wonderful," said Schinkel.

"Mr. Schinkel, will you do me the pleasure to go away — I don't care where — out of this house?" Madame Poupin broke out in French.

"Yes, that will be the best thing, and I will go with you," said Hyacinth.

"If you would retire, my child, I think it would be a service that you would render us," Poupin returned, appealing to his young friend. "Won't you do us the justice to believe that you may leave your interests in our hands?"

Hyacinth hesitated a moment; it was now perfectly clear to him that Schinkel had some sort of message for him, and his curiosity as to what it might be had become nearly intolerable. "I am surprised at your weakness," he observed, as sternly as he could manage it, to Poupin.

The Frenchman stared at him an instant, and then fell on his neck. “You are sublime, my young friend — you are sublime!”

“Will you be so good as to tell me what you are going to do with that young man?” demanded Madame Poupin, glaring at Schinkel.

“It’s none of your business, my poor lady!” Hyacinth replied, disengaging himself from her husband. “Schinkel, I wish you would walk away with me.”

“Calmons-nous, entendons-nous, ex-pliquons-nous! The situation is very simple,” Poupin went on.

“I will go with you, if it will give you pleasure,” said Schinkel, very obligingly, to Hyacinth.

“Then you will give me that letter first!” Madame Poupin, erecting herself, declared to the German.

“My wife, you are an imbecile!” Poupin groaned, lifting his hands and shoulders and turning away.

“I may be an imbecile, but I won’t be a party — no, God help me, not to that!” protested the Frenchwoman, planted before Schinkel as if to prevent his moving.

“If you have a letter for me, you ought to give it to me,” said Hyacinth to Schinkel. “You have no right to give it to any one else.”

“I will bring it to you in your house, my good friend,” Schinkel replied, with a little wink that seemed to say that Madame Poupin would have to be considered.

“Oh, in his house — I’ll go to his house!” cried the lady. “I regard you, I have always regarded you, as my child,” she declared to Hyacinth, “and if this isn’t an occasion for a mother!”

“It’s you that are making it an occasion. I don’t know what you are talking about,” said Hyacinth. He had been questioning Schinkel’s eye, and he thought he saw there a little twinkle of assurance that he might really depend upon him.

“I have disturbed you, and I think I had better go away.”

Poupin had turned round again; he seized the young man’s arm eagerly, as if to prevent his retiring before he had given a certain satisfaction. “How can you care, when you know everything is changed?”

“What do you mean — everything is changed?”

“Your opinions, your sympathies, your whole attitude. I don’t approve of it — je le constate. You have withdrawn your confidence from the people; you have said things in this spot, where you stand now, that have given pain to my wife and me.”

“If we didn’t love you, we should say that you had betrayed us!” cried Madame Poupin, quickly, taking her husband’s idea.

“Oh, I shall never betray you,” said Hyacinth, smiling.

“You will never betray us — of course you think so. But you have no right to act for the people when you have ceased to believe in the people. II faut etre consequent, nom de Dieu,” Poupin went on.

“You will give up all thoughts of acting for me — je ne permets pas ya!” exclaimed his wife.

“It is probably not of importance — only a little fraternal greeting,” Schinkel suggested, soothingly.

“We repudiate you, we deny you, we denounce you!” shouted Poupin, more and more excited.

“My poor friends, it is you who have broken down, not I,” said Hyacinth. “I am much obliged to you for your solicitude, but the inconsequence is yours. At all events, goodnight.”

He turned away from them, and was leaving the room, when Madame Poupin threw herself upon him, as her husband had done a moment before, but in silence, and with an extraordinary force of passion and distress. Being stout and powerful, she quickly got the better of him, and pressed him to her ample bosom in a long, dumb embrace.

“I don’t know what you want me to do,” said Hyacinth, as soon as he could speak. “It’s for me to judge of my convictions.”

“We want you to do nothing, because we know you have changed,” Poupiu replied. “Doesn’t it stick out of you, in every glance of your eye and every breath of your life? It’s only for that, because that alters everything.”

“Does it alter my engagement? There are some things in which one can’t change. I didn’t promise to believe; I promised to obey.”

“We want you to be sincere — that is the great thing,” said Poupin edifyingly. “I will go to see them — I will make them understand.”

“Ah, you should have done that before!” Madame Poupin groaned.

“I don’t know whom you are talking about, but I will allow no one to meddle in my affairs.” Hyacinth spoke with sudden vehemence; the scene was cruel to his nerves, which were not in a condition to bear it.

“When it is Hoffendahl, it is no good to meddle,” Schinkel remarked, smiling.

“And pray, who is Hoffendahl, and what authority has he got?” demanded Madame Poupin, who had caught his meaning. “Who has put him over us all, and is there nothing to do but to lie down in the dust before him? Let him attend to his little affairs himself, and not put them off on innocent children, no matter whether they are with us or against us.”

This protest went so far that, evidently, Poupin felt a little ashamed of his wife. “He has no authority but what we give him; but you know that we respect him, that he is one of the pure, ma bonne. Hyacinth can do exactly as he likes; he knows that as well as we do. He knows there is not a feather’s weight of compulsion; he knows that, for my part, I long since ceased to expect anything from him.”

“Certainly, there is no compulsion,” said Schinkel. “It’s to take or to leave. Only they keep the books.”

Hyacinth stood there before the three, with his eyes on the floor. “Of course I can do as I like, and what I like is what I shall do. Besides, what are we talking about, with such sudden passion?” he asked, looking up. “I have no summons, I have no sign. When the call reaches me, it will be time to discuss it. Let it come, or not come: it’s not my affair.”

“Certainly, it is not your affair,” said Schinkel.

“I can’t think why M. Paul has never done anything, all this time, knowing that everything is different now!” Madame Poupin exclaimed.

“Yes, my dear boy, I don’t understand our friend,” her husband remarked, watching Hyacinth with suspicious, contentious eyes.

“It’s none of his business, any more than ours; it’s none of any one’s business!” Schinkel declared.

“Muniment walks straight; the best thing you can do is to imitate him,” said Hyacinth, trying to pass Poupin, who had placed himself before the door.

“Promise me only this — not to do anything till I have seen you first,” the Frenchman begged, almost piteously.

“My poor old friend, you are very weak.” And Hyacinth opened the door, in spite of him, and passed out.

“Ah, well, if you are with us, that’s all I want to know!” the young man heard him say, behind him, at the top of the stairs, in a different voice, a tone of sudden, exaggerated fortitude.

Chapter XLIV

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HYACINTH HURRIED down and got out of the house, but he had not the least intention of losing sight of Schinkel. The odd behavior of the Poupins was a surprise and annoyance, and he had wished to shake himself free from it. He was candidly astonished at the alarm they were so good as to feel for him, for he had never perceived that they had gone round to the hope that the note he had signed (as it were) for Hoffendahl would not be presented. What had he said, what had he done, after all, to give them the right to fasten on him the charge of apostasy? He had always been a free critic of everything, and it was natural that, on certain occasions, in the little parlor in Lisson Grove, he should have spoken in accordance with that freedom; but it was only with the Princess that he had permitted himself really to rail at the democracy, and given the full measure of his skepticism. He would have thought it indelicate to express contempt for the opinions of his old foreign friends, to whom associations that made them memorable were attached; and, moreover, for Hyacinth, a change of heart was, in the nature of things, much more an occasion for a hush of publicity and a kind of retrospective reserve; it couldn’t prompt one to aggression or jubilation. When one had but lately discovered what could be said on the opposite side one didn’t want to boast of one’s sharpness — not even when one’s new convictions cast shadows that looked like the ghosts of the old.

Hyacinth lingered in the street, a certain distance from the house, watching for Schinkel’s exit, and prepared to remain there, if necessary, till the dawn of another day. He had said to his friends, just before, that the manner in which the communication they looked so askance at should reach him was none of his business — it might reach him as it could. This was true enough in theory, but in fact his desire was overwhelming to know what Madame Poupin had meant by her allusion to a letter, destined for him, in Schinkel’s possession — an allusion confirmed by Schinkel’s own virtual acknowledgment. It was indeed this eagerness that had driven him out of the house, for he had reason to believe that the German would not fail him, and it galled his suspense to see the foolish Poupins try to interpose, to divert the mission from its course. He waited and waited, in the faith that Schinkel was dealing with them in his slow, categorical Teutonic way, and only objurgated the cabinetmaker for having in the first place dallied with his sacred trust. Why hadn’t he come straight to him — whatever the mysterious document was — instead of talking it over with the inconsequents? Passers were rare, at this hour, in Lisson Grove, and lights were mainly extinguished; there was nothing to look at but the vista of the low black houses, the dim, interspaced street-lamps, the prowling cats who darted occasionally across the road, and the terrible, mysterious, far-off stars, which appeared to him more than ever to see everything and to tell nothing. A policeman creaked along on the opposite side of the way, looking across at him as he passed, and stood for some minutes on the corner, as if to keep an eye on him. Hyacinth had leisure to reflect that the day was perhaps not far off when a policeman might have his eye on him for a very good reason — might walk up and down, pass and repass, as he mounted guard over him.

It seemed horribly long before Schinkel came out of the house, but it was probably only half an hour. In the stillness of the street he heard Poupin let his visitor out, and at the sound he stepped back into the recess of a doorway on the same side, so that, in looking out, the Frenchman should not see him waiting. There was another delay, for the two stood talking together interminably and in a low tone on the doorstep. At last, however, Poupin went in again, and then Schinkel came down the street towards Hyacinth, who had calculated that he would proceed in that direction, it being, as Hyacinth happened to know, that of his own lodging. After he had heard Poupin go in, he stopped, and looked up and down; it was evidently his idea that

Hyacinth would be waiting for him. Our hero stepped out of the shallow recess in which he had been flattening himself, and came straight to him, and the two men stood there face to face, in the dusky, empty, sordid street.

"You didn't let them have the letter?"

"Oh no, I retained it," said Schinkel, with his eyes more than ever like invisible points.

"Then hadn't you better give it to me?"

"We will talk of that — we will talk." Schinkel made no motion to satisfy his friend; he had his hands in the pockets of his trousers, and his appearance was characterized by an exasperating assumption that they had the whole night before them. He was intolerably deliberate.

"Why should we talk? Haven't you talked enough with those people, all the evening? What have they to say about it? What right have you to detain a letter that belongs to me?"

"Srlauben Sie: I will light my pipe," the German remarked. And he proceeded to this business, methodically, while Hyacinth's pale, excited face showed in the glow of the match that he ignited on the rusty railing beside them. "It is not yours unless I have given it to you," Schinkel went on, as they walked along. "Be patient, and I will tell you," he added, passing his hand into his companion's arm. "Your way, not so? We will go down toward the Park." Hyacinth tried to be patient, and he listened with interest when Schinkel said, "She tried to take it; she attacked me with her hands. But that was not what I went for, to give it up."

"Is she mad? I don't recognize them," Hyacinth murmured.

"No, but they love you."

"Why, then, do they try to disgrace me?"

"They think it is no disgrace, if you have changed."

"That's very well for her; but it 'g pitiful for him, and I declare it surprises me."

"Oh, he came round, and he helped me to resist. He pulled his wife off. It was the first shock," said Schinkel.

"You oughtn't to have shocked them, my dear fellow," Hyacinth replied.

"I was shocked myself — I couldn't help it."

"Lord, how shaky you all are!"

"You take it well. I am very sorry. But it is a fine chance," Schinkel went on, smoking away. His pipe, for the moment, seemed to absorb him, so that after a silence Hyacinth resumed —

"Be so good as to reflect that all this while I don't in the least understand what you are talking about."

"Well, it was this morning, early," said the German. "You know in my country we don't lie in bed late, and what they do in my country I try to do everywhere. I think it is good enough. In winter I get up, of course, long before the sun, and in summer I get up almost at the same time. I should see the fine spectacle of the sunrise, if in London you could see. The first thing I do of a Sunday is to smoke a pipe at my window, which is at the front, you remember, and looks into a little dirty street. At that hour there is nothing to see there — you English are so slow to leave the bed. Not much, however, at any time; it is not important, my little street. But my first pipe is the one I enjoy most. I want nothing else when I have that pleasure. I look out at the new, fresh light — though in London it is not very fresh — and I think it is the beginning of another day. I wonder what such a day will bring; whether it will bring anything good to us poor devils. But I have seen a great many pass, and nothing has come. This morning, however, brought something — something, at least, to you. On the other side of the way I saw a young man, who stood just opposite to my house, looking up at my window. He looked at me straight, without any ceremony, and I smoked my pipe and looked at him. I wondered what he wanted, but he made no sign and spoke no word. He was a very nice young man; he had an umbrella, and he wore spectacles. We remained that way, face to face, perhaps for a quarter of an hour, and at last he took out his watch — he had a watch, too — and held it in his hand, just glancing at it every few minutes, as if to let me know that he would rather not give me the whole day. Then it came over me that he wanted to speak to me! You would have guessed that before, but we good Germans are slow. When we understand, however, we act; so I nodded to him, to let him know I would come down. I put on my coat and my shoes, for I was only in my shirt and stockings (though of course I had on my trousers), and I went down into the street. When he saw me come he walked slowly away, but at the end of a little distance he waited for me. When I came near him I saw that he was a very nice young man indeed — very young, with a very pleasant, friendly face. He was also very neat, and he had gloves, and his umbrella was of silk. I liked him very much. He said I should come round the corner, so we went round the corner together. I thought there would be some one there waiting for us; but there was nothing — only the closed shops and the early light, and a little spring mist, which told that the day would be fine. I didn't know what he wanted; perhaps it was some of our business — that's what I first thought — and perhaps it was only a little game. So I was very careful; I didn't ask him to come into the house. Yet I told him that he must excuse me for not understanding more quickly that he wished to speak with me; and when I said that, he said it was not of consequence — he would have waited there, for the chance to see me, all day. I told him I was glad I had spared him that, at least, and we had some very polite conversation. He was a very nice young man. But what he wanted was simply to put a letter in my hand; as he said himself, he was only a kind of private postman. He gave me the letter — it was not addressed; and when I had taken it I asked him how he knew, and if he wouldn't be sorry if it should turn out that I was not the man for whom the letter was meant. But I didn't give him a start; he told me he knew all it was necessary for him to know — he knew

exactly what to do and how to do it. I think he is a valuable member. I asked him if the letter required an answer, and he told me he had nothing to do with that; he was only to put it in my hand. He recommended me to wait till I had gone into the house again to read it. We had a little more talk — always very polite; and he mentioned that he had come so early because he thought I might go out, if he delayed, and because, also, he had a great deal to do, and had to take his time when he could. It is true that he looked as if he had plenty to do — as if he was in some very good occupation. I should tell you that he spoke to me always in English, but he is not English; he sounded his words like some kind of foreigner. I suppose he is not German, or he would have spoken to me in German. But there are so many, of all countries. I said if he had so much to do I wouldn't keep him; I would go to my room and open my letter. He said it wasn't important; and then I asked him if he wouldn't come into my room, also, and rest. I told him it wasn't very handsome, my room — because he looked like a young man who would have, for himself, a very nice lodging. Then I found he meant it wasn't important that we should talk any more, and he went away without even offering to shake hands. I don't know if he had other letters to give, but he went away, as I have said, like a postman on his rounds, without giving me any more information."

It took Schinkel a long time to unfold this history; he proceeded with a good-humored deliberation which took no account of any painful acuteness of curiosity that Hyacinth might feel. He went from step to step, and treated his different points with friendly explicitness, as if each would have exactly the same interest for his companion. The latter made no attempt to hurry him, and indeed he listened, now, with a kind of intense patience; for he was interested, and, moreover, it was clear to him that he was safe with Schinkel; the German would satisfy him in time — wouldn't worry him with attaching conditions to their transaction, in. spite of the mistake he had made in going for guidance to Lisson Grove. Hyacinth learned in due course that on returning to his apartment and opening the little packet of which he had been put into possession, Mr. Schinkel had found himself confronted with two separate articles: one a sealed letter superscribed with our young man's name, the other a sheet of paper containing in three lines a request that within two days of receiving it he would hand the letter to the "young Robinson." The three lines in question were signed D. H., and the letter was addressed in the same hand. Schinkel professed that he already knew the hand — it was that of Diedrich Hoffendahl. "Good, good," he said, pressing his hand, soothingly, upon Hyacinth's arm. "I will walk with you to your door, and I will give it to you there; unless you like better that I should keep it till tomorrow morning, so that you may have a quiet sleep — I mean in case it might contain anything that will be disagreeable to you. But it is probably nothing; it is probably only a word to say that you need think no more about your 'engagement.' "

""Why should it be that?" Hyacinth asked.

"Probably he has heard that you repent."

"That I repent?" Hyacinth stopped him short; they had just reached the top of Park Lane. "To whom have I given a right to say that?"

"Ah well, if you haven't, so much the better. It may be, then, for some other reason."

"Don't be an idiot, Schinkel," Hyacinth returned, as they walked along. And in a moment he went on, "What the devil did you go and blab to the Poupins for?"

"Because I thought they would like to know. Besides, I felt my responsibility; I thought I should carry it better if they knew it. And then, I'm like them — I love you."

Hyacinth made no answer to this profession; he asked the next instant, "Why didn't your young man bring the letter directly to me?"

"Ah, I didn't ask him that! The reason was probably not complicated, but simple — that those who wrote it knew my address, and didn't know yours. And wasn't I one of your guarantors?"

"Yes, but not the principal one. The principal one was Muniment. Why was the letter not sent to me through him?"

"My dear Robinson, you want to know too many things. Depend upon it, there are always good reasons. I should have liked it better if it had been Muniment. But if they didn't send to him" — Schinkel interrupted himself; the remainder of his sentence was lost in a cloud of smoke.

"Well, if they didn't send to him" — Hyacinth persisted.

"You 're a great friend of his — how can I tell you?"

At this Hyacinth looked up at his companion askance, and caught an odd glance, accompanied with a smile, which the mild, circumspect German directed toward him. "If it's anything against him, my being his friend makes me just the man to hear it. I can defend him."

"Well, it's a possibility that they are not satisfied."

"How do you mean it — not satisfied?"

"How shall I say it? — that they don't trust him."

"Don't trust him? And yet they trust me!"

"Ah, my boy, depend upon it, there are reasons," Schinkel replied; and in a moment he added, "They know everything — everything. Oh, they go straight!"

The pair pursued the rest of their course for the most part in silence, Hyacinth being considerably struck with something that dropped from his companion in answer to a question he asked as to what Eustache Poupin had said when Schinkel, that evening, first told him what he had come to see him about. "Il vaut du galme —

il vaut du galme:" that was the German's version of the Frenchman's words; and Hyacinth repeated them over to himself several times, almost with the same accent. They had a certain soothing effect. In fact, the good Schinkel was soothing altogether, as our hero felt when they stopped at last at the door of his lodging in Westminster, and stood there face to face, while Hyacinth waited — waited. The sharpness of his impatience had passed away, and he watched without irritation the loving manner in which the German shook the ashes out of his big pipe and laid it to rest in its coffin. It was only after he had gone through this business with his usual attention to every detail of it that he said, "Also, now for the letter," and, putting his hand inside of his waistcoat, drew forth the important document. It passed instantly into Hyacinth's grasp, and our young man transferred it to his own pocket without looking at it. He thought he saw a shade of disappointment in Schinkel's ugly, kindly face, at this indication that he should have no present knowledge of its contents; but he liked that better than his pretending to say again that it was nothing — that it was only a release. Schinkel had now the good sense, or the good taste, not to repeat that remark, and as the letter pressed against his heart Hyacinth felt still more distinctly that it was something — that it was a command. What Schinkel did say, in a moment, was, "Now that you've got it, I am very glad. It is more comfortable for me."

"I should think so!" Hyacinth exclaimed. "If you hadn't done your job you would have paid for it."

Schinkel hesitated a moment while he lingered; then, as Hyacinth turned away, putting in his door key, he replied, "And if you don't do yours, so will you."

"Yes, as you say, they go straight! Goodnight." And our young man let himself in.

The passage and staircase were never lighted, and the lodgers either groped their way bedward with the infallibility of practice, or scraped the wall with a casual match, which, in the milder gloom of day, was visible in a hundred bold streaks. Hyacinth's room was on the second floor, behind, and as he approached it he was startled by seeing a light proceed from the crevice under the door, the imperfect fitting of which was in this manner vividly illustrated. He stopped and considered this mysterious brightness, and his first impulse was to connect it with the incident just ushered in by Schinkel; for what could anything that touched him now be but a part of the same business? It was natural that some punctual emissary should be awaiting him. Then it occurred to him that when he went out to call on Lady Aurora, after tea, he had simply left a tallow candle burning, and that it showed a cynical spirit on the part of his landlady, who could be so close-fisted for herself, not to have gone in and put it out. Lastly, it came over him that he had had a visitor, in his absence, and that the visitor had taken possession of his apartment till his return, seeking sources of comfort, as was perfectly just. When he opened the door he found that this last prevision was the right one, though his visitor was not one of the figures that had risen before him. Mr. Vetch sat there, beside the little table at which Hyacinth did his writing, with his head resting on his hand and his eyes bent on the floor. He looked up when Hyacinth appeared, and said, "Oh, I didn't hear you; you are very quiet."

"I come in softly, when I'm late, for the sake of the house — though I am bound to say I am the only lodger who has that refinement. Besides, you have been asleep," Hyacinth said.

"No, I have not been asleep," returned the old man. "I don't sleep much nowadays."

"Then you have been plunged in meditation."

"Yes, I have been thinking." Then Mr. Vetch explained that the woman of the house wouldn't let him come in at first, till he had given proper assurances that his intentions were pure, and that he was, moreover, the oldest friend Mr. Robinson had in the world. He had been there for an hour; he thought he might find him, coming so late.

Hyacinth answered that he was very glad he had waited, and that he was delighted to see him, and expressed regret that he hadn't known in advance of his visit, so that he might have something to offer him. He sat down on his bed, vaguely expectant; he wondered what special purpose had brought the fiddler so far at that unnatural hour. But he only spoke the truth in saying that he was glad to see him. Hyacinth had come upstairs in a tremor of desire to be alone with the revelation that he carried in his pocket; yet the sight of Theophilus Vetch gave him a sudden relief by postponing solitude. The place where he had put his letter seemed to throb against his side, yet he was thankful to his old friend for forcing him still to leave it there. "I have been looking at your books," the fiddler said; "you have two or three exquisite specimens of your own. Oh yes, I recognize your work when I see it; there are always certain little extra touches. You have a manner, like a master. With such a talent, such a taste, your future leaves nothing to be desired. You will make a fortune and become a great celebrity." Mr. Vetch sat forward, to sketch this vision; he rested his hands on his knees and looked very hard at his young friend, as if to challenge him to dispute his high inductions. The effect of what Hyacinth saw in his face was to give him immediately the idea that the fiddler knew something, though it was impossible to guess how he could know it. The Poupins, for instance, had had no time to communicate with him, even granting that they were capable of that baseness; an unwarrantable supposition, in spite of Hyacinth's having seen them, less than an hour before, fall so much below their own standard. With this suspicion there rushed into Hyacinth's mind an intense determination to dissemble, before his visitor, to the last; he might imagine what he liked, but he should not have a grain of satisfaction — or rather he should have that of being led to believe, if possible, that his suspicions were positively vain and idle. Hyacinth rested his eyes on the books that Mr. Vetch had taken down from the shelf, and admitted that they were very pretty work, and that so long as one didn't become blind or maimed the ability to produce that sort of thing was a legitimate source of confidence. Then, suddenly, as they continued simply to look at each other, the pressure of

the old man's curiosity, the expression of his probing, beseeching eyes, which had become strange and tragic in these latter times, and completely changed their character, became so intolerable that to defend himself Hyacinth took the aggressive, and asked him, boldly, whether it were simply to look at his work, of which he had half a dozen specimens in Lomax Place, that he had made a nocturnal pilgrimage. "My dear old friend, you have something on your mind — some fantastic fear, some extremely perverse idee fixe. Why has it taken you tonight, in particular? Whatever it is, it has brought you here, at an unnatural hour, you don't know why. I ought, of course, to be thankful to anything that brings you here; and so I am, in so far as that it makes me happy. But I can't like it if it makes you miserable. You 're like a nervous mother, whose baby's in bed upstairs; she goes up every five minutes to see if he's all right — if he isn't uncovered or hasn't tumbled out of bed. Dear Mr. Vetch, don't, don't worry; the blanket's up to my chin, and I haven't tumbled yet."

Hyacinth heard himself say these things as if he were listening to another person; the impudence of them, under the circumstances, seemed to him, somehow, so rare. But he believed himself to be on the edge of an episode in which impudence, evidently, must play a considerable part, and he might as well try his hand at it without delay. The way the old man gazed at him might have indicated that he too was able to take the measure of his perversity — that he knew he was false, as he sat there declaring that there was nothing the matter, while a brand-new revolutionary commission burned in his pocket. But in a moment Mr. Vetch said, very mildly, as if he had really been reassured, "It's wonderful how you read my thoughts. I don't trust you; I think there are beastly possibilities. It's not true, at any rate, that I come to look at you every five minutes. You don't know how often I have resisted my fears — how I have forced myself to let you alone."

"You had better let me come and live with you, as I proposed after Pinnie's death. Then you will have me always under your eyes," said Hyacinth, smiling.

The old man got up eagerly, and, as Hyacinth did the same, laid his hands upon his shoulders, holding him close. "Will you now, really, my boy? Will you come tonight?"

"Tonight, Mr. Vetch?"

"Tonight has worried me more than any other, I don't know why. After my tea I had my pipe and a glass, but I couldn't keep quiet; I was very, very bad. I got to thinking of Pinnie — she seemed to be in the room. I felt as if I could put out my hand and touch her. If I believed in ghosts, I should believe I had seen her. She wasn't there for nothing; she was there to add her fears to mine — to talk to me about you. I tried to hush her up, but it was no use, and she drove me out of the house. About ten o'clock I took my hat and stick and came down here. You may judge whether I thought it important, as I took a cab."

"Ah, why do you spend your money so foolishly?" asked Hyacinth, in a tone of the most affectionate remonstrance.

"Will you come tonight?" said the old man, for all rejoinder, holding him still.

"Surely, it would be simpler for you to stay here. I see perfectly that you are ill and nervous. You can take the bed, and I'll spend the night in the chair."

The fiddler thought a moment. "No, you'll hate me if I subject you to such discomfort as that; and that's just what I don't want."

"It won't be a bit different in your room; there, as here, I shall have to sleep in a chair."

"I'll get another room; we shall be close together," the fiddler went on.

"Do you mean you'll get another room at this hour of the night, with your little house stuffed full and your people all in bed? My poor Theophilus, you are very bad; your reason totters on its throne," said Hyacinth humorously and indulgently.

"Very good, we'll get a room tomorrow. I'll move into another house, where there are two, side by side." Hyacinth's tone was evidently soothing to him.

"Comme vous y allez!" the young man continued. "Excuse me if I remind you that in case of my leaving this place I have to give a fortnight's notice."

"Ah, you 're backing out!" the old man exclaimed, dropping his hands.

"Pinnie wouldn't have said that," Hyacinth rejoined. "If you are acting, if you are speaking, at the prompting of her pure spirit, you had better act and speak exactly as she would have done. She would have believed me."

"Believed you? Believed what?

What is there to believe? If you'll make me a promise, I will believe that." "I'll make you any promise you like," said Hyacinth.

"Oh, any promise I like — that isn't what I want! I want just one very particular little pledge; and that is really what I came here for tonight. It came over me that I've been an ass, all this time, never to have demanded it of you before. Give it to me now, and I will go home quietly and leave you in peace." Hyacinth, assenting in advance, requested again that he would formulate his demand, and then the old man said, "Well, promise me that you will never, under any circumstances whatever, do anything."

"Do anything?"

"Anything that those people expect of you."

"Those people?" Hyacinth repeated.

"Ah, don't torment me with pretending not to understand!" the old man. begged. "You know the people I mean. I can't call them by their names, because I don't know them. But you do, and they know you."

Hyacinth had no desire to torment Mr. Vetch, but he was capable of reflecting that to enter into his thought too easily would be tantamount to betraying himself. “I suppose I know the people you have in mind,” he said, in a moment; “but I’m afraid I don’t grasp the idea of the promise.”

“Don’t they want to make use of you?”

“I see what you mean,” said Hyacinth. “You think they want me to touch off some train for them. Well, if that’s what troubles you, you may sleep sound. I shall never do any of their work.”

A radiant light came into the fiddler’s face, and he stared, as if this assurance were too fair for nature. “Do you take your oath on that? Never anything, anything, anything?”

“Never anything at all.”

“Will you swear it to me by the memory of that good woman of whom we have been speaking, and whom we both loved?”

“My dear old Pinnie’s memory? Willingly.”

The old man sank down in his chair and buried his face in his hands; the next moment his companion heard him sobbing. Ten minutes later he was content to take his departure, and Hyacinth went out with him to look for another cab. They found an ancient fourwheeler stationed, languidly, at a crossing of the ways, and before Mr. Vetch got into it he asked his young friend to kiss him. That young friend watched the vehicle get itself into motion and rattle away; he saw it turn a neighboring corner. Then he approached the nearest gas lamp, and drew from his breast pocket the letter that Schinkel had given him.

Chapter XLV

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“AND Madame Grandoni, then?” asked Hyacinth, reluctant to turn away. He felt pretty sure that he should never knock at that door again, and the desire was strong in him to see once more, for the last time, the ancient, troubled suivante of the Princess, whom he had always liked. She had seemed to him ever to be in the slightly ridiculous position of a confidante of tragedy in whom the heroine should have ceased to confide.

“E andata via, caro signorino,” said Assunta, smiling at him as she stood there holding the door open.

“She has gone away? Bless me, when did she go?”

“It is now five days, dear young sir. She has returned to our country.”

“Is it possible?” exclaimed Hyacinth, disappointedly.

“E possillissimo!” said Assunta. Then she added, “There were many times when she almost went; but this time — capisce” — And without finishing her sentence the Princess’s Roman tirewoman indulged in a subtle, suggestive, indefinable play of expression, to which her hands and shoulders contributed, as well as her lips and eyebrows.

Hyacinth looked at her long enough to catch any meaning that she might have wished to convey, but gave no sign of apprehending it. He only remarked, gravely, “In short, she is here no more.”

“And the worst is that she will probably never come back. She didn’t go for a long time, but when she decided herself it was finished,” Assunta declared. “Peccato!” she added, with a sigh.

“I should have liked to see her again — I should have liked to bid her good-by.” Hyacinth lingered there in strange, melancholy vagueness; since he had been told the Princess was not at home he had no reason for remaining, save the possibility that she might return before he turned away. This possibility, however, was small, for it was only nine o’clock, the middle of the evening — too early an hour for her to reappear, if, as Assunta said, she had gone out after tea. He looked up and down the Crescent, gently swinging his stick, and became conscious in a moment that Assunta was regarding him with tender interest.

“You should have come back sooner; then perhaps she wouldn’t have gone, povera vecchia” she rejoined in a moment. “It is too many days since you have been here. She liked you — I know that.”

“She liked me, but she didn’t like me to come,” said Hyacinth. “Wasn’t that why she went, because we came?”

“Ah, that other one — quel grande — yes. But you are better.”

“The Princess doesn’t think so, and she is the right judge,” Hyacinth replied, smiling.

“Eh, who knows what she thinks? It is not for me to say. But you had better come in and wait. I dare say she won’t be long, and it would gratify her to find you.”

Hyacinth hesitated. “I am not sure of that.” Then he asked, “Did she go out alone?”

“Sola, sola,” said Assunta, smiling. “Eh, don’t be afraid; you were the first.” And she flung open the door of the little drawingroom, with an air of irresistible solicitation and sympathy.

He sat there nearly an hour, in the chair she habitually used, under her shaded lamp, with a dozen objects around him which seemed as much a part of herself as if they had been portions of her dress or even tones of her voice. His thoughts were tremendously active, but his body was too tired for restlessness; he had not been to work, and had been walking about all day, to fill the time; so that he simply reclined there, with his head on one of the Princess’s cushions, his feet on one of her little stools — one of the ugly ones, that belonged to the house — and his respiration Doming quickly, like that of a man in a state of acute agitation. Hyacinth was

agitated now, but it was not because he was waiting for the Princess; a deeper source of emotion had been opened to him, and he had not on the present occasion more sharpness of impatience than had already visited him at certain moments of the past twenty hours. He had not closed his eyes the night before, and the day had not made up for that torment. A fever of reflection had descended upon him, and the range of his imagination had been wide. It whirled him through circles of immeasurable compass; and this is the reason that, thinking of many things while he sat in the Princess's chair, he wondered why, after all, he had come to Madeira Crescent, and what interest he could have in seeing the lady of the house. He had a very complete sense that everything was over between them; that the link had snapped which bound them so closely together for a while. And this was not simply because for a long time now he had received no sign or communication from her, no invitation to come back, no inquiry as to why his visits had stopped. It was not because he had seen her go in and out with Paul Muniment, nor because it had suited Prince Casamassima to point the moral of her doing so, nor even because, quite independently of the Prince, he believed her to be more deeply absorbed in her acquaintance with that superior young man than she had ever been in her relations with himself. The reason, so far as he became conscious of it in his fitful meditations, could only be a strange, detached curiosity — strange and detached because everything else of his past had been engulfed in the abyss that opened before him as, after Mr. Vetch had left him, he stood under the lamp in a paltry Westminster street. That had swallowed up all familiar feelings, and yet out of the ruin had sprung the impulse which brought him to where he sat.

The solution of his difficulty — he flattered himself he had arrived at it — involved a winding up of his affairs; and though, even if no solution had been required, he would have felt clearly that he had been dropped, yet as even in that case it would have been sweet to him to bid her good-by, so, at present, the desire for some last vision of her own hurrying fate could still appeal to him. If things had not gone well for him, he was still capable of wondering whether they looked better for her. It is a singular fact, but there rose in his mind a sort of incongruous desire to pity her. All these were odd feelings enough, and by the time half an hour had elapsed they had throbbed themselves into weariness and into slumber. While he remembered that he was waiting now in a very different frame from that in which he waited for her in South Street, the first time he went to see her, he closed his eyes and lost himself. His unconsciousness lasted, he afterwards perceived, nearly half an hour; it terminated in his becoming aware that the lady of the house was standing before him. Assunta was behind her, and as he opened his eyes she took from her mistress the bonnet and mantle of which the Princess divested herself. "It's charming of you to have waited," the latter said, smiling down at him with all her old kindness. "You 're very tired — don't get up; that's the best chair, and you must keep it." She made him remain where he was; she placed herself near him on a smaller seat; she declared that she was not tired herself, that she didn't know what was the matter with her — nothing tired her now; she exclaimed on the time that had elapsed since he had last called, as if she were reminded of it simply by seeing him again; and she insisted that he should have some tea — he looked so much as if he needed it. She considered him with deeper attention, and wished to know what was the matter with him — what he had done to use himself up; adding that she must begin and look after him again, for while she had the care of him that kind of thing didn't happen. In response to this Hyacinth made a great confession: he admitted that he had stayed away from work and simply amused himself — amused himself by loafing about London all day. This didn't pay — he was beginning to discover it as he grew older; it was doubtless a sign of increasing years when one began to perceive that wanton pleasures were hollow, and that to stick to one's tools was not only more profitable, but more refreshing. However, he did stick to them, as a general thing; that was no doubt partly why, from the absence of the habit of it, a day off turned out to be rather a grind. When Hyacinth had not seen the Princess for some time, he always, on meeting her again, had a renewed tremendous sense of her beauty, and he had it tonight in an extraordinary degree. Splendid as that beauty had ever been, it seemed clothed at present in transcendent glory, and (if that which was already supremely fine could be capable of greater refinement) to have worked itself free of all earthly grossness and been purified and consecrated by her new life. Her gentleness, when she was in the mood for it, was something divine (it had always the irresistible charm that it was the humility of a high spirit), and on this occasion she gave herself up to it. Whether it was because he had the consciousness of resting his eyes upon her for the last time, or because she wished to be particularly pleasant to him in order to make up for having, amid other preoccupations, rather dropped him of late (it was probable the effect was a product of both causes), at all events, the sight of her loveliness seemed none the less a privilege than it had done the night he went into her box, at the play, and her presence lifted the weight from his soul. He suffered himself to be coddled and absently, even if radiantly, smiled at, and his state of mind was such that it could produce no alteration of his pain to see that on the Princess's part these were inexpensive gifts. She had sent Assunta to bring them tea, and when the tray arrived she gave him cup after cup, with every restorative demonstration; but he had not sat with her a quarter of an hour before he perceived that she scarcely measured a word he said to her, or a word that she herself uttered. If she had the best intention of being nice to him, by way of compensation, this compensation was for a wrong that was far from vividly present to her mind. Two points became perfectly clear: one was that she was thinking of something very different from her present, her past, or her future relations with Hyacinth Robinson; the other was that he was superseded indeed. This was so completely the case that it did not even occur to her, it was evident, that the sense of supersession might be cruel to the young man. If 'she was charming to him, it was

because she was goodnatured and he had been hanging off, and not because she had done him an injury. Perhaps, after all. she hadn't, for he got the impression that it might be no great loss of comfort not to constitute part of her life to-day. It was manifest from her eye, from her smile, from every movement and tone, and indeed from all the irradiation of her beauty, that that life to-day was tremendously wound up. If he had come to Madeira Crescent because he was curious to see how she was getting on, it was sufficiently intimated to him that she was getting on well; that is, that she was living more than ever on high hopes and bold plans and far-reaching combinations. These things, from his own point of view, ministered less to happiness, and to be mixed up with them was perhaps not so much greater a sign that one had not lived for nothing than the grim argument which, in the interest of peace, he had just arrived at with himself. She asked him why he had not been to see her for so long, quite as if this failure were only a vulgar form of social neglect; and she scarcely seemed to notice whether it were a good or a poor excuse when he said he had stayed away because he knew her to be extremely busy. But she did not deny the impeachment; she admitted that she had been busier than ever in her life before. She looked at him as if he would know what that meant, and he remarked that he was very sorry for her.

"Because you think it's all a mistake! Yes, I know that. Perhaps it is; but if it is, it's a magnificent one. If you were scared about me three or four months ago, I don't know what you would think to-day — if you knew! I have risked everything."

"Fortunately, I don't know," said Hyacinth.

"No, indeed, how should you?"

"And to tell the truth," he went on, "that is really the reason I haven't been back here till to - night. I haven't wanted to know — I have feared and hated to know."

"Then why did you come at last?"

Hyacinth hesitated a moment. "Out of a kind of inconsistent curiosity."

"I suppose, then, you would like me to tell you where I have been tonight, eh?"

"No, my curiosity is satisfied. I have learned something — what I mainly wanted to know — without your telling me."

She stared an instant. "Ah, you mean whether Madame Grandoni was gone? I suppose Assunta told you."

"Yes, Assunta told me, and I was sorry to hear it."

The Princess looked grave, as if her old friend's departure was indeed a very serious incident. "You may imagine how I feel it! It leaves me completely alone; it makes, in the eyes of the world, an immense difference in my position. However, I don't consider the eyes of the world. At any rate, she couldn't put up with me any more — it appears that I am more and more shocking; and it was written!" On Hyacinth's asking what the old lady would do, she replied, "I suppose she will go and live with my husband." Five minutes later she inquired of him whether the same reason that he had mentioned just before was the explanation of his absence from Audley Court. Mr. Muniment had told her that he had not been near him and his sister for more than a month.

"No, it isn't the fear of learning something that would make me uneasy: because, somehow, in the first place it isn't natural to feel uneasy about Paul, and in the second, if it were, he never lets one see anything. It is simply the general sense of real divergence of view. When that divergence becomes sharp, it is better not to pester each other."

"I see what you mean. But you might go and see his sister."

"I don't like her," said Hyacinth, amply.

"Ah, neither do I!" the Princess exclaimed, smiling; while her visitor remained conscious of the perfect composure, the absence of false shame, with which she had referred to their common friend. But she was silent after this, and he judged that he had stayed long enough and sufficiently taxed a preoccupied attention. He got up, and was bidding her goodnight, when she checked him by saying, suddenly, "By the way, your not going to see so good a friend as Mr. Muniment, because you disapprove to-day of his work, suggests to me that you will be in an awkward fix, with your disapprovals, the day you are called upon to serve the cause according to your vow."

"Oh, of course I've thought of that," said Hyacinth, smiling.

"And would it be indiscreet to ask what you have thought?"

"Ah, so many things, Princess! It would take me a long time to say."

"I have never talked to you about this, because it seemed to me indelicate, and the whole thing too much a secret of your own breast for even so intimate a friend as I have been to have a right to meddle with it. But I have wondered much — seeing that you cared less and less for the people — how you would reconcile your change of heart with the performance of your engagement. I pity you, my poor friend," the Princess went on, with a heavenly sweetness, "for I can imagine nothing more terrible than to find yourself face to face with such an engagement, and to feel at the same time that the spirit which prompted it is dead within you."

"Terrible, terrible, most terrible," said Hyacinth, gravely, looking at her.

"But I pray God it may never be your fate!" The Princess hesitated a moment; then she added, "I see you feel it. Heaven help us all!" She paused, then went on: "Why shouldn't I tell you, after all? A short time ago I had a visit from Mr. Vetch."

"It was kind of you to see him," said Hyacinth.

"He was delightful, I assure you. But do you know what he came for? To beg me, on his knees, to snatch

you away."

"To snatch me away?"

"From the danger that hangs over you. Poor man, he was very pathetic."

"Oh yes, he has talked to me about it," Hyacinth said. "He has picked up the idea, but he knows nothing whatever about it. And how did he expect that you would be able to snatch me?"

"He left that to me; he had only a general conviction of my influence with you."

"And he thought you would exercise it to make me back out? He does you injustice; you wouldn't!" Hyacinth exclaimed, smiling. "In that case, taking one false position with another, yours would be no better than mine."

"Oh, speaking seriously, I am perfectly quiet about you and about myself. I know you won't be called," the Princess returned.

"May I inquire how you know it?"

After a slight hesitation, she replied, "Mr. Muniment tells me so."

"And how does he know it?"

"We have information. My dear fellow," the Princess went on, "you are so much out of it now that if I were to tell you, you wouldn't understand."

"Yes, no doubt I am out of it; but I still have a right to say, all the same, in contradiction to your imputation of a moment ago, that I care for the people exactly as much as I ever did."

"My poor Hyacinth, my poor infatuated little aristocrat, was that ever very much?" the Princess asked.

"It was enough, and it is still enough, to make me willing to lay down my life for anything that will really help them."

"Yes, and of course you must decide for yourself what that is; or, rather, what it's not."

"I didn't decide when I gave my promise. I agreed to take the decision of others," Hyacinth said.

"Well, you said just now that in relation to this business of yours you had thought of many things," the Princess rejoined. "Have you ever, by chance, thought of anything that will help the people?"

"You call me fantastic names, but I'm one of them myself."

"I know what you are going to say!" the Princess broke in. "You are going to say that it will help them to do what you do — to do their work, and earn their wages. That's beautiful so far as it goes. But what do you propose for the thousands and thousands for whom no work — on the overcrowded earth, under the pitiless heaven — is to be found? There is less and less work in the world, and there are more and more people to do the little that there is. The old ferocious selfishness must come down. They won't come down gracefully, so they must be smashed!"

The tone in which the Princess uttered these words made Hyacinth's heart beat fast, and there was something so inspiring in her devoted fairness that the vision of a great heroism flashed up again before him, in all the splendor it had lost — the idea of a tremendous risk and an unregarded sacrifice. Such a woman as that, at such a moment, made every scruple seem a prudence and every compunction a cowardice. "I wish to God I could see it as you see it!" he exclaimed, after he had looked at her a minute in silent admiration.

"I see simply this: that what we are doing is at least worth trying; and that as none of those who have the power, the place, the means, will try anything else, on their head be the responsibility, on their head be the blood!"

"Princess," said Hyacinth, clasping his hands, and feeling that he trembled, "dearest Princess, if anything should happen to you" — and his voice fell; the horror of it, a dozen hideous images of her possible perversity and her possible punishment, were again before him, as he had already seen them, in sinister musings; they seemed to him worse than anything he had imagined for himself.

She threw back her head, looking at him almost in anger. "To me! And pray why not to me? What title have I to exemption, to security, more than any one else? Why am I so sacrosanct and so precious?"

"Simply because there is no one in the world, and there has never been any one in the world, like you."

"Oh, thank you," said the Princess, with a kind of dry impatience, turning away.

The manner in which she spoke put an end to their conversation. It expressed an indifference to what it might interest him to think about her to-day, and even a contempt for it, which brought tears to his eyes. His tears, however, were concealed by the fact that he bent his head over her hand, which he had taken to kiss; after which he left the room without looking at her.

Chapter XLVI

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"I HAVE RECEIVED A letter from your husband," Paul Muniment said to the Princess, the next evening, as soon as he came into the room. He announced this fact with a kind of bald promptitude, and with a familiarity of manner which showed that his visit was one of a closely connected series. The Princess was evidently not a little surprised by it, and immediately asked how in the world the Prince could know his address. "Couldn't it have been by your old lady?" Muniment inquired. "He must have met her in Paris. It is from Paris that he

writes."

"What an incorrigible cad!" the Princess exclaimed.

"I don't see that — for writing to me. I have his letter in my pocket, and I will show it to you, if you like."

"Thank you, nothing would induce me to touch anything he has touched," the Princess replied.

"You touch his money, my dear lady," Muniment remarked, with the quiet smile of a man who sees things as they are.

The Princess hesitated a little. "Yes, I make an exception for that, because it hurts him, it makes him suffer."

"I should think, on the contrary, it would gratify him by showing you in a condition of weakness and dependence."

"Not when he knows I don't use it for myself. What exasperates him is that it is devoted to ends that he hates almost as much as he hates me, and yet that he can't call selfish."

"He doesn't hate you," said Muniment, with that tone of pleasant reasonableness that he used when he was most imperturbable. "His letter satisfies me of that." The Princess stared at this, and asked him what he was coming to — whether he was leading up to advising her to go back and live with her husband. "I don't know that I would go so far as to advise," he replied; "when I have so much benefit from seeing you here, on your present footing, that wouldn't sound well. But I'll just make bold to prophesy that you will go before very long."

"And on what does that extraordinary prediction rest?"

"On this plain fact — that you will have nothing to live upon. You decline to read the Prince's letter, but if you were to look at it it would give you evidence of what I mean. He informs me that I need count upon no more supplies from your hands, as you yourself will receive no more."

"He addresses you that way, in plain terms!"

"I can't call them very plain, because the letter is written in French, and I naturally have had a certain difficulty in making it out, in spite of my persevering study of the tongue and the fine example set me by poor Robinson. But that appears to be the gist of the matter."

"And you can repeat such an insult to me without the smallest apparent discomposure? You 're the most remarkable man!" the Princess broke out.

"Why is it an insult? It is the simple truth. I do take your money," said Paul Muniment.

"You take it for a sacred cause; you don't take it for yourself."

"The Prince isn't obliged to look at that," Muniment rejoined, laughing.

His companion was silent for a moment; then, "I didn't know you were on his side," she replied, gently.

"Oh, you know on what side I am!"

"What does he know? What business has he to address you so?"

"I suppose he knows from Madame Grandoni. She has told him that I have great influence upon you."

"She was welcome to tell him that!" the Princess exclaimed.

"His reasoning, therefore, has been that when I find you have nothing more to give to the cause I will let you go."

"Nothing more? And does he count me, myself, and every pulse of my being, every capacity of my nature, as nothing?" the Princess cried, with shining eyes.

"Apparently he thinks that I do."

"Oh, as for that, after all, I have known that you care far more for my money than for me. But it has made no difference to me," said the Princess.

"Then you see that by your own calculation the Prince is right."

"My dear sir," Muniment's hostess replied, "my interest in you never depended on your interest in me. It depended wholly on a sense of your great destinies. I suppose that what you began to tell me is that he stops my allowance."

"From the first of next month. He has taken legal advice. It is now clear — so he tells me — that you forfeit your settlements."

"Can I not take legal advice, too?" the Princess asked. "Surely I can contest that. I can forfeit my settlements only by an act of my own. The act that led to our separation was his act; he turned me out of his house by physical violence."

"Certainly," said Muniment, displaying even in this simple discussion his easy aptitude for argument; "but since then there have been acts of your own." He stopped a moment, smiling; then he went on: "Your whole connection with a secret society constitutes an act, and so does your exercise of the pleasure, which you appreciate so highly, of feeding it with money extorted from an old Catholic arid princely family. You know how little it is to be desired that these matters should come to light."

"Why in the world need they come to light? Allegations in plenty, of course, he would have, but not a particle of proof. Even if Madame Grandoni were to testify against me, which is inconceivable, she would not be able to produce a definite fact."

"She would be able to produce the fact that you had a little bookbinder staying for a month in your house."

"What has that to do with it?" the Princess demanded. "If you mean that that is a circumstance which would put me in the wrong as against the Prince, is there not, on the other side, this circumstance, that while

our young friend was staying with me Madame Grandoni herself, a person of the highest and most conspicuous respectability, never saw fit to withdraw from me her countenance and protection? Besides, why shouldn't I have my bookbinder, just as I might have (and the Prince should surely appreciate my consideration in not having) my physician and my chaplain?"

"Am I not your chaplain?" said Muniment, with a laugh. "And does the bookbinder usually dine at the princess's table?"

"Why not, if he's an artist? In the old times, I know, artists dined with the servants; but not to-day."

"That would be for the court to appreciate," Muniment remarked. And in a moment he added, "Allow me to call your attention to the fact that Madame Grandoni has left you — has withdrawn her countenance and protection."

"Ah, but not for Hyacinth!" the Princess returned, in a tone which would have made the fortune of an actress, if an actress could have caught it.

"For the bookbinder or for the chaplain, it doesn't matter. But that's only a detail," said Muniment. "In any case, I shouldn't in the least care for your going to law."

The Princess rested her eyes upon him for a while in silence, and at last she replied, "I was speaking just now of your great destinies, but every now and then you do something, you say something, that makes me doubt of them. It's when you seem afraid. That's terribly against your being a firstrate man."

"Oh, I know you have thought me a coward from the first of your knowing me. But what does it matter? I haven't the smallest pretension to being a firstrate man."

"Oh, you 're deep, and you 're provoking!" murmured the Princess, with a sombre eye.

"Don't you remember," Muniment continued, without heeding this somewhat passionate ejaculation— "don't you remember how, the other day, you accused me of being not only a coward, but a traitor; of playing false; of wanting, as you said, to back out?"

"Most distinctly. How can I help its coming over me, at times, that you have incalculable ulterior views, and are only using me — only using us all? But I don't care."

"No, no; I'm genuine," said Paul Muniment, simply, yet in a tone which might have implied that the discussion was idle. And he immediately went on, with a transition too abrupt for perfect civility: "The best reason in the world for your not having a lawsuit with your husband is this: that when you haven't a penny left you will be obliged to go back and live with him."

"How do you mean, when I haven't a penny left? Haven't I my own property?" the Princess demanded.

"The Prince tells me that you have drawn upon your own property at such a rate that the income to be derived from it amounts, to his positive knowledge, to no more than a thousand francs — forty pounds — a year. Surely, with your habits and tastes, you can't live on forty pounds. I should add that your husband implies that your property, originally, was but a small affair."

"You have the most extraordinary tone," observed the Princess, gravely. "What you appear to wish to express is simply this: that from the moment I have no more money to give you I am of no more value than the skin of an orange."

Muniment looked down at his shoe awhile. His companion's words had brought a flush into his cheek; he appeared to admit to himself and to her that, at the point at which their conversation had arrived, there was a natural difficulty in his delivering himself. But presently he raised his head, and showed a face still slightly embarrassed, but none the less bright and frank. "I have no intention whatever of saying anything harsh or offensive to you, but, since you challenge me, perhaps it is well that I should let you know that I do consider that in giving your money — or, rather, your husband's — to our business you gave the most valuable thing you had to contribute."

"This is the day of plain truths!" the Princess exclaimed, with a laugh that was not expressive of pleasure. "You don't count, then, any devotion, any intelligence, that I may have placed at your service, even rating my faculties modestly?"

"I count your intelligence, but I don't count your devotion, and one is nothing without the other. You are not trusted at headquarters."

"Not trusted!" the Princess repeated, with her splendid stare. "Why, I thought I could be hanged tomorrow!"

"They may let you hang, perfectly, without letting you act. You are liable to be weary of us," Paul Muniment went on; "and, indeed, I think you are weary of us already."

"Ah, you must be a firstrate man, you are such a brute!" replied the Princess, who noticed, as she had noticed before, that he pronounced "weary" weery.

"I didn't say you were weary of me," said Muniment, blushing again. "You can never live poor — you don't begin to know the meaning of it."

"Oh, no, I am not tired of you," the Princess returned, in a strange tone. "In a moment you will make me cry with passion, and no man has done that for years. I was very poor when I was a girl," she added, in a different manner. "You yourself recognized it just now, in speaking of the insignificant character of my fortune."

"It had to be a fortune, to be insignificant," said Muniment, smiling. "You will go back to your husband!"

To this declaration she made no answer whatever; she only sat looking at him in sombre calmness. "I don't

see, after all, why they trust you more than they trust me," she remarked.

"I am not sure that they do," said Muniment. "I have heard something this evening which suggests that."

"And may one know what it is?"

"A communication which I should have expected to be made through me has been made through another person."

"A communication?"

"To Hyacinth Robinson."

"To Hyacinth" — The Princess sprang up; she had turned pale in a moment.

"He has got his ticket; but they didn't send it through me."

"Do you mean his orders? He was here last night," the Princess said.

"A fellow named Schinkel, a German — whom you don't know, I think, but who was a sort of witness, with me and another, of his undertaking — came to see me this evening. It was through him the summons came, and he put Hyacinth up to it on Sunday night."

"On Sunday night?" The Princess stared. "Why, he was here yesterday, and he talked of it, and he told me nothing."

"That was quite right of him, bless him!" Muniment exclaimed.

The Princess closed her eyes a moment, and when she opened them again Muniment had risen and was standing before her. "What do they want him to do?" she asked.

"I am like Hyacinth; I think I had better not tell you — at least till it's over."

"And when will it be over?"

"They give him several days, and, I believe, minute instructions," said Muniment, "with, however, considerable discretion in respect to seizing his chance. The thing is made remarkably easy for him. All this I know from Schinkel, who himself knew nothing on Sunday, being a mere medium of transmission, but who saw Hyacinth yesterday morning."

"Schinkel trusts you, then?" the Princess remarked.

Muniment looked at her steadily a moment. "Yes, but he won't trust you. Hyacinth is to receive a card of invitation to the house," he went on, "a card with the name left in blank, so that he may fill it out himself. It is to be good for each of two big parties which are to be given at a few days' interval. That's why they give him the job — because at a party he'll look in his place."

"He will like that," said the Princess, musingly— "repaying hospitality with a pistol-shot."

"If he doesn't like it, he needn't do it."

The Princess made no rejoinder to this, but in a moment she said, "I can easily find out the place you mean — the house where two great parties are to be given at a few days' interval, and where the master is worth your powder."

"Easily, no doubt. And do you want to warn him?"

"No, I want to do the business first, so that it won't be left for another. If Hyacinth will look in his place at a big party, should not I look still more in mine? And as I know the individual, I should be able to approach him without exciting the smallest suspicion."

Muniment appeared to consider her suggestion a moment, as if it were practical and interesting; but presently he answered, smiling, "To fall by your hand would be too good for him."

"However he falls, will it be useful, valuable?" the Princess asked.

"It's worth trying. He's a bad institution."

"And don't you mean to go near Hyacinth?"

"No, I wish to leave him free," Muniment answered.

"Ah, Paul Muniment," murmured the Princess, "you are a firstrate man!" She sank down upon the sofa, and sat looking up at him. "In God's name, why have you told me this?" she broke out.

"So that you should not be able to throw it up at me, later, that I had not."

She threw herself over, burying her face in the cushions, and remained so, for some minutes, in silence. Muniment watched her awhile, without speaking; but at last he remarked, "I don't want to aggravate you, but you will go back!" The words failed to cause her to raise her head, and after a moment he quietly went out.

Chapter XLVII

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THAT THE Princess had done with him, done with him forever, remained the most vivid impression that Hyacinth had carried away from Madeira Crescent the night before. He went home, and he flung himself on his narrow bed, where the consolation of sleep again descended upon him. But he woke up with the earliest dawn, and the beginning of a new day was a quick revival of pain. He was over-past, he had become vague, he was extinct. The things that Sholto had said to him came back to him, and the compassion of foreknowledge that Madame Grandoni had shown him from the first. Of Paul Muniment he only thought to wonder whether he knew. An insurmountable desire to do justice to him, for the very reason that there might be a temptation to

oblique thoughts, forbade him to challenge his friend even in imagination. He vaguely wondered whether he would ever be superseded; but this possibility faded away in a stronger light — a kind of dazzling vision of some great tribune-ship, which swept before him now and again, and in which the figure of the Princess herself seemed merged and extinguished. When full morning came at last, and he got up, it brought with it, in the restlessness which made it impossible to him to remain in his room, a return of that beginning of an answerless question, “After all — after all” — which the Princess had planted there the night before when she spoke so bravely in the name of the Revolution. “After all — after all, since nothing else was tried, or would, apparently, ever be tried” — He had a sense of his mind, which had been made up, falling to pieces again; but that sense in turn lost itself in a shudder which was already familiar — the horror of the reappearance, on his part, of the imbrued hands of his mother. This loathing of the idea of a repetition had not been sharp, strangely enough, till his summons came; in all his previous meditations the growth of his reluctance to act for the “party of action” had not been the fear of a personal stain, but the simple extension of his observation. Yet now the idea of the personal stain made him horribly sick; it seemed by itself to make service impossible. It rose before him like a kind of backward accusation of his mother; to suffer it to start out in the life of her son was in a manner to publish again her own obliterated maculation. The thought that was most of all with him was that he had time — he had time; he was grateful for that, and saw a kind of delicacy in their having given him a margin, and not condemned him to be pressed by the hours. He had another day, he had two days, he might take even three. He knew he should be terribly weary of them before they were over; but, for that matter, they would be over whenever he liked. Anyhow, he went forth again into the streets, into the squares, into the parks, solicited by an aimless desire to steep himself yet once again in the great city that he knew and loved, and that had had so many of his smiles and tears and confidences. The day was gray and damp, though no rain fell, and London had never appeared to him to wear more proudly and publicly the face of London. He passed slowly to and fro over Westminster bridge, and watched the black barges drift on the great brown river, and looked up at the huge fretted palace rising there as a fortress of the social order which he, like the young David, had been commissioned to attack with a sling and a pebble. At last he made his way to St. James’s Park, and he strolled there a long time. He revolved about it, and he went a considerable distance up the Buckingham Palace Road. He stopped at a certain point and came back again, and then he retraced his steps in the former direction. He looked in the windows of shops, and he looked in particular into the long, glazed expanse of that establishment in which, at that hour of the day, Millicent Henning discharged superior functions. Millicent’s image had descended upon him after he came out, and now it moved before him as he went, it clung to him, it refused to quit him. He made, in truth, no effort to drive it away; he held fast to it in return, and it murmured strange things in his ear. She had been so jolly to him on Sunday; she was such a strong, obvious, simple nature, with such a generous breast and such a freedom from the sophistries of civilization. All that he had ever liked in her came back to him now with a finer air, and there was a moment, during which he hung over the rail of the bridge that spans the lake in St. James’s Park and mechanically followed the movement of the swans, when he asked himself whether, at bottom, he hadn’t liked her better, almost, than any one. He tried to think he had, he wanted to think he had; and he seemed to see the look her eyes would have if he should tell her that he had. Something of that sort had really passed between them on Sunday; only the business that had come up’ since had superseded it. Now the taste of the vague, primitive comfort that his Sunday had given him came back to him, and he asked himself whether he mightn’t know it a second time. After he had thought he couldn’t again wish for anything, he found himself wishing that he might believe there was something Millicent could do for him. Mightn’t she help him — mightn’t she even extricate him? He was looking into a window — not that of her own shop — when a vision rose before him of a quick flight with her, for an undefined purpose, to an undefined spot; and he was glad, at that moment, to have his back turned to the people in the street, because his face suddenly grew red to the tips of his ears. Again and again, all the same, he indulged in the reflection that spontaneous, uncultivated minds often have inventions, inspirations. Moreover, whether Millicent should have any or not, he might at least feel her arms around him. He didn’t exactly know what good it would do him or what door it would open; but he should like it. The sensation was not one he could afford to defer, but the nearest moment at which he could enjoy it would be that evening. He had thrown over everything, but she would be busy all day; nevertheless, it would be a gain, it would be a kind of foretaste, to see her earlier, to have three words with her. He wrestled with the temptation to go into her establishment, because he knew she didn’t like it (he had tried it once, of old); as the visits of gentlemen, even when ostensible purchasers (there were people watching about who could tell who was who), compromised her in the eyes of her employers. This was not an ordinary case, however; and though he hovered about the place a long time, undecided, embarrassed, half ashamed, at last he went in, as by an irresistible necessity. He would just make an appointment with her, and a glance of the eye and a single word would suffice. He remembered his way through the labyrinths of the shop; he knew that her department was on the second floor. He walked through the place, which was crowded, as if he had as good a right as any one else; and as he had entertained himself, on rising, with putting on his holiday garments, in which he made such a distinguished little figure, he was not suspected of any purpose more nefarious than that of looking at some nice thing to give a lady. He ascended the stairs, and found himself in a large room where made-up articles were exhibited, and where, though there were twenty people in it, a glance told him he shouldn’t find Millicent. She was perhaps in the next one, into which he passed by a wide opening. Here also were numerous

purchasers, most of them ladies; the men were but three or four, and the disposal of the wares was in the hands of neat young women, attired in black dresses with long trains. At first it appeared to Hyacinth that the young woman he sought was even here not within sight, and he was turning away, to look elsewhere, when suddenly he perceived that a tall gentleman, standing in the middle of the room, was none other than Captain Sholto. It next became plain to him that the person standing upright before the captain, as still as a lay-figure and with her back turned to Hyacinth, was the object of his own quest. In spite of her averted face he instantly recognized Millicent; he knew her shop attitude, the dressing of her hair behind, and the long, grand lines of her figure, draped in the last new thing. She was exhibiting this article to the captain, and he was lost in contemplation. He had been beforehand with Hyacinth as a false purchaser, but he imitated a real one better than our young man, as, with his eyes traveling up and down the front of Millicent's person, he frowned, consideringly, and rubbed his lower lip slowly with his walking-stick. Millicent stood admirably still, and the back view of the garment she displayed was magnificent. Hyacinth, for a minute, stood as still as she. At the end of that minute he perceived that Sholto saw him, and for an instant he thought he was going to direct Millicent's attention to him. But Sholto only looked at him very hard, for a few seconds, without telling her he was there; to enjoy that satisfaction he would wait till the second comer was gone. Hyacinth gazed back at him for the same length of time — what these two pairs of eyes said to each other requires perhaps no definite mention — and then turned away.

That evening, about nine o'clock, the Princess Casamassima drove in a hansom to Hyacinth's lodgings in Westminster. The door of the house was a little open, and a man stood on the step, smoking his big pipe, and looking up and down. The Princess, seeing him while she was still at some distance, had hoped he was Hyacinth, but he proved to be a very different figure indeed from her devoted young friend. He had not a forbidding countenance, but he looked very hard at her as she descended from her hansom and approached the door. She was used to being looked at hard, and she didn't mind this; she supposed he was one of the lodgers in the house. He edged away to let her pass, and watched her while she endeavored to impart an elasticity of movement to the limp bell-pull beside the door. It gave no audible response, so that she said to him, "I wish to ask for Mr. Hyacinth Robinson. Perhaps you can tell me — a" —

" Yes, I too," the man replied, smiling. "I have come also for that."

The Princess hesitated a moment. "I think you must be Mr. Schinkel. I have heard of you."

"You know me by my bad English," her interlocutor remarked, with a sort of benevolent coquetry.

"Your English is remarkably good — I wish I spoke German as well. Only just a hint of an accent, and, evidently, an excellent vocabulary."

"I think I have heard, also, of you," said Schinkel, appreciatively.

"Yes, we know each other, in our circle, don't we? We are all brothers and sisters." The Princess was anxious, she was in a fever; but she could still relish the romance of standing in a species of back-slum and fraternizing with a personage looking like a very tame horse whose collar galled him. "Then he's at home, I hope; he is coming down to you?" she went on.

"That's what I don't know. I am waiting."

"Have they gone to call him?"

Schinkel looked at her, while he puffed his pipe. "I have called him myself, but he will not say."

"How do you mean — he will not say?"

"His door is locked. I have knocked many times."

"I suppose he is out," said the Princess.

"Yes, he may be out," Schinkel remarked, considerately.

He and the Princess stood a moment looking at each other, and then she asked, "Have you any doubt of it?"

"Oh, es kann sein. Only the woman of the house told me five minutes ago that he came in."

"Well, then, he probably went out again," the Princess remarked. "Yes, but she didn't hear him." The Princess reflected, and was conscious that she was flushing. She knew what Schinkel knew about their young friend's actual situation, and she wished to be very clear with him, and to induce him to be the same with her. She was rather baffled, however, by the sense that he was cautious, and justly cautious. He was polite and inscrutable, quite like some of the high personages — ambassadors and cabinet ministers — whom she used to meet in the great world. "Has the woman been here, in the house, ever since?" she asked in a moment.

"No, she went out for ten minutes, half an hour ago."

"Surely, then, he may have gone out again in that time!" the Princess exclaimed.

"That is what I have thought. It is also why I have waited here," said Schinkel. "I have nothing to do," he added, serenely.

"Neither have I," the Princess rejoined. "We can wait together."

"It's a pity you haven't got some room," the German suggested.

"No, indeed; this will do very well. We shall see him the sooner when he comes back."

"Yes, but perhaps it won't be for long."

"I don't care for that; I will wait. I hope you don't object to my company," she went on, smiling.

"It is good, it is good," Schinkel responded, through his smoke.

"Then I will send away my cab." She returned to the vehicle and paid the driver, who said, "Thank you, my lady," with expression, and drove off.

"You gave him too much," said Schinkel, when she came back.

"Oh, he looked like a nice man. I am sure he deserved it."

"It is very expensive." Schinkel went on, sociably.

"Yes, and I have no money, but it's done. Was there no one else in the house while the woman was away?" the Princess asked.

"No, the people are out; she only has single men. I asked her that. She has a daughter, but the daughter has gone to see her cousin. The mother went only a hundred yards, round the corner there, to buy a pennyworth of milk. She locked this door, and put the key in her pocket; she stayed at the grocer's, where she got the milk, to have a little conversation with a friend that she met there. You know ladies always stop like that — nicht wahr? It was half an hour later that I came. She told me that he was at home, and I went up to his room. I got no sound, as I have told you. I came down and spoke to her again, and she told me what I say."

"Then you determined to wait, as I have done," said the Princess.

"Oh, yes, I want to see him."

"So do I, very much." The Princess said nothing more, for a minute; then she added, "I think we want to see him for the same reason."

"Das kann sein — das kann sein."

The two continued to stand there in the brown evening, and they had some further conversation, of a desultory and irrelevant kind. At the end of ten minutes the Princess broke out, in a low tone, laying her hand on her companion's arm, "Mr. Schinkel, this won't do. I'm intolerably nervous."

"Yes, that is the nature of ladies," the German replied, imperturbably.

"I wish to go up to his room," the Princess pursued. "You will be so good as to show me where it is."

"It will do you no good, if he is not there."

The Princess hesitated. "I am not sure he is not there."

"Well, if he won't speak, it shows he likes better not to have visitors."

"Oh, he may like to have me better than he does you!" the Princess exclaimed.

"Das kann sein — das kann sein." But Schinkel made no movement to introduce her into the house.

"There is nothing tonight — you know what I mean," the Princess remarked, after looking at him a moment.

"Nothing tonight?"

"At the duke's. The first party is on Thursday, the other is next Tuesday."

"Schon. I never go to parties," said Schinkel.

"Neither do I."

"Except that this is a kind of party — you and me," suggested Schinkel.

"Yes, and the woman of the house doesn't approve of it." The footstep of the personage in question had been audible in the passage, through the open door, which was presently closed, from within, with a little reprehensive bang. Something in this incident appeared to quicken exceedingly the Princess's impatience and emotion; the menace of exclusion from the house made her wish more even than before to enter it. "For God's sake, Mr. Schinkel, take me up there. If you won't, I will go alone," she pleaded.

Her face was white now, and it need hardly be added that it was beautiful. The German considered it a moment in silence; then turned and reopened the door and went in, followed closely by his companion.

There was a light in the lower region, which tempered the gloom of the staircase — as high, that is, as the first floor; the ascent the rest of the way was so dusky that the pair went slowly, and Schinkel led the Princess by the hand. She gave a suppressed exclamation as she rounded a sharp turn in the second flight. "Good God, is that his door, with the light?"

"Yes, you can see under it. There was a light before," said Schinkel, without confusion.

"And why, in Heaven's name, didn't you tell me?"

"Because I thought it would worry you."

"And doesn't it worry you?"

"A little, but I don't mind," said Schinkel. "Very likely he may have left it."

"He doesn't leave candles!" the Princess returned, with vehemence. She hurried up the few remaining steps to the door, and paused there with her ear against it. Her hand grasped the handle, and she turned it, but the door resisted. Then she murmured, pantingly, to her companion, "We must go in — we must go in!"

"What will you do, when it '& locked?" he inquired.

"Yon must break it down."

"It is very expensive," said Schinkel.

"Don't be abject!" cried the Princess. "In a house like this the fastenings are certainly flimsy; they will easily yield."

"And if he is not there — if he comes back and finds what we have done?"

She looked at him a moment through the darkness, which was mitigated only by the small glow proceeding from the chink. "He is there! Before God, he is there!"

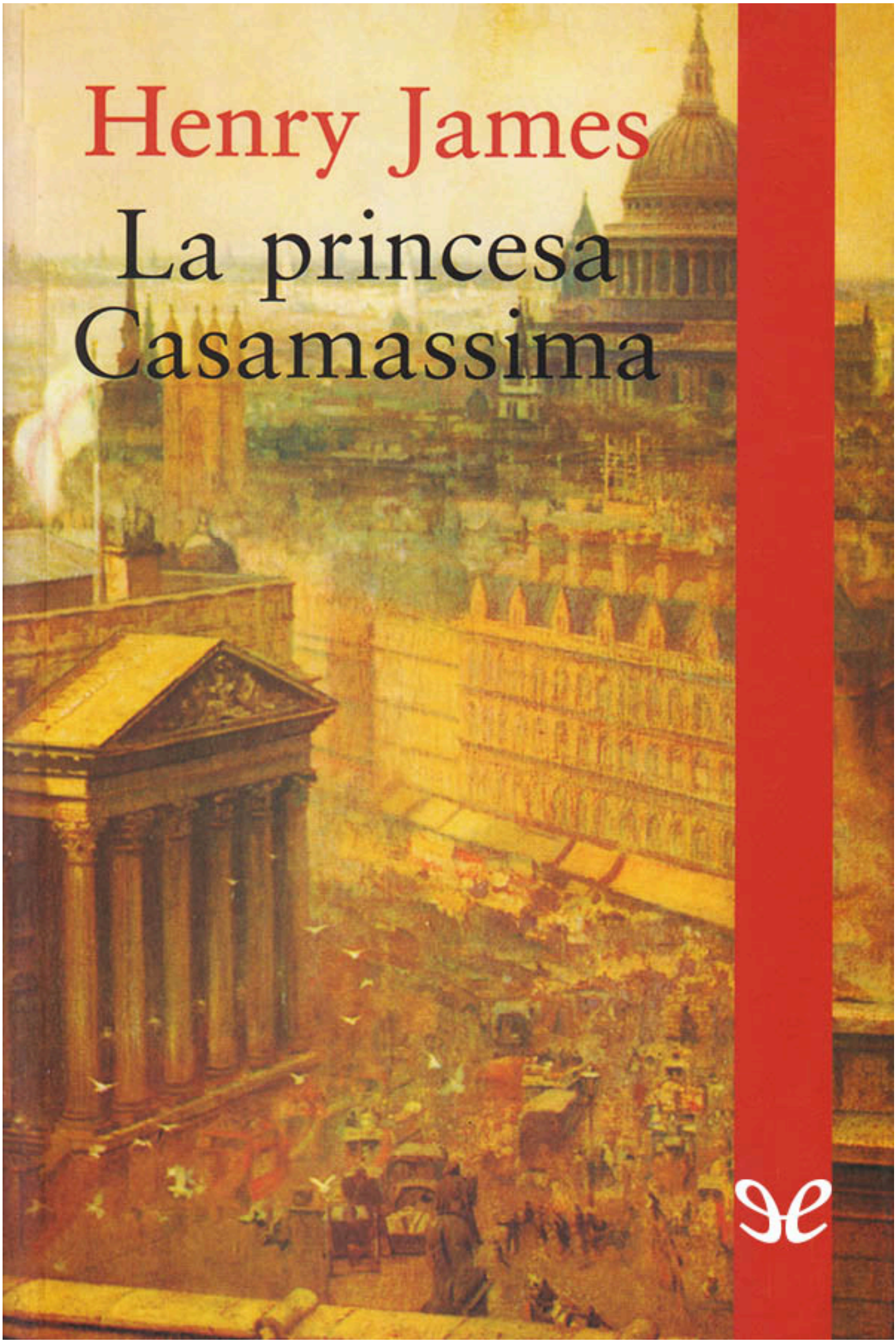
"Schon, schon," said her companion, as if he felt the contagion of her own dread, but was deliberating and meant to remain calm. The Princess assured him that one or two vigorous thrusts with his shoulder would burst the bolt — it was sure to be some wretched little bolt — and she made way for him to come close. He did

so, he even leaned against the door, but he gave no violent push, and the Princess waited, with her hand against her heart. Schinkel, apparently, was still deliberating. At last he gave a low sigh. “I know they found him the pistol; it is only for that,” he murmured; and the next moment Christina saw him sway sharply to and fro, in the gloom. She heard a crack and saw that the lock had yielded. The door went back: they were in the light; they were in a small room, which looked full of things. The light was that of a single candle on the mantel; it was so poor that for a moment she made out nothing definite. Before that moment was over, however, her eyes had attached themselves to the small bed. There was something on it — something black, something outstretched. Schinkel held her back, but only for an instant; she saw everything, and with the very act she flung herself beside the bed, upon her knees. Hyacinth lay there as if he were asleep, but there was a horrible thing, a mess of blood, on the bed, in his side, in his heart. His arm hung limp beside him, downwards, off the narrow couch; his face was white and his eyes were closed. So much Schinkel saw, but only for an instant; a convulsive movement of the Princess, bending over the body, while a strange low cry came from her lips, covered it up. He looked about him for the weapon, for the pistol, but the Princess, in her rush at the bed, had pushed it out of sight. “It’s a pity they found it — if he hadn’t had it here!” he exclaimed to her. He had determined to remain calm, so that, on turning round at the quick advent of the little woman of the house, who had hurried up, white, scared, staring, at the sound of the crashing door, he was able to say, very quietly and gravely, “Mr. Robinson has shot himself through the heart. He must have done it while you were getting the milk.” The Princess got up, hearing another person in the room, and then Schinkel perceived the small revolver, lying just under the bed. He picked it up, and carefully placed it on the mantelshelf, keeping, equally carefully, to himself the reflection that it would certainly have served much better for the duke.

THE END

Henry James

La princesa Casamassima



La princesa Casamassima es una de las más brillantes pero menos conocidas novelas de Henry James. Forma, junto a *Las bostonianas* y *La musa trágica*, una especie de tríptico sobre la problemática social de los agitados años de finales del siglo XIX y principios del XX. Nació, según el propio Henry James, del interés que despertó en él lo que veía al «pasear por la calle» en el Londres de la revolución industrial, una dantesca ciudad de contrastes entre miseria y opulencia. Es la historia de Hyacinth Robinson, un modesto encuadernador con alma de artista, hijo natural de un lord inglés y de una francesa que, al verse abandonada, asesina a su amante y muere en la cárcel. Hyacinth crece solo, sin padres, o con una galería de personajes que irán cumpliendo ese papel. Arquetipo de la inocencia y la humildad, tendrá que abrirse camino en una sociedad cruel y miserable que debe regenerarse por «una gran matanza sinfónica». Conseguirá llegar a las alturas marcadas por sus sueños con la ayuda de la princesa Casamassima, una mujer bella, brillante, excéntrica y encantadora. Sin duda, uno de los personajes más atractivos de toda la obra de Henry James. La princesa abraza la causa de los oprimidos y renuncia a sus privilegios para compartir su existencia con Hyacinth. Pero en él surgirán dudas y pesares: puede el ser humilde, que del paraíso bajó a los infiernos y fue redimido por «un ángel radiante», saber moverse entre la aristocracia, y, lo que es peor, puede evitar que el ser amado no llegue a preferir a uno de sus iguales. *La princesa Casamassima* es una aguda crítica de las convenciones sociales que, ambientada en la época que le tocó vivir a Henry James, traspasa los límites del tiempo y se hace universal.

Henry James

La princesa Casamassima

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Prólogo

Creo que la forma más sencilla de explicar el origen de *La princesa Casamassima* es decir que la novela nació directamente del interés y la costumbre de pasear por la calle durante el primer año de una larga estancia en Londres. Andaba mucho, como ejercicio, por diversión, para aprender, y sobre todo volvía siempre andando cuando cenaba fuera de casa, caso mucho más frecuente que lo contrario; y como hacer eso significaba recibir muchas impresiones, éstas se agitaban y buscaban una salida, de forma que al cabo de algún tiempo había nacido el libro. Puedo afirmar que, cuando echo la vista atrás, la exploración atenta de Londres, el asalto directo que la gran ciudad lleva a cabo sobre una imaginación predispuesta a reaccionar, explica plenamente una gran parte de la obra. Hay otro elemento secundario que tiene su origen en una fuente distinta, y del que ahora hablaré, pero la idea primera fue, sin duda alguna, el fruto rotundo y maduro de andar por las calles. Claro que uno andaba con los ojos abiertos de par en par, y me apresuro a decir que semejante costumbre, mantenida durante mucho tiempo y en recorridos considerables, llega a provocar una solicitación mística, una urgente llamada de todas las cosas a ser interpretadas y, en la medida de lo posible, reproducidas. «Argumentos» y situaciones, carácter e historia, la tragedia y la comedia de la vida son cosas que, en tales condiciones, parecen mascarse punzantes en el aire; y para una mente que sienta curiosidad ante la escena humana, sus significados y revelaciones, la gran Babilonia gris se transforma fácilmente en un jardín cuajado de inmensa e ilustrativa flora. Historias posibles, figuras presentables se levantan mientras el observador se mueve en la espesa selva, aletean como la caza espantada y, antes de que se dé cuenta, él mismo necesita protegerse del roce de importunas alas. Camina con la cabeza envuelta en una nube de zumbantes presencias, sobre todo en la primera época, la de la iniciación, los frescos, agudamente inquietos meses o años, más o menos numerosos. Agotamos nuestro material, llegamos a consumir hasta el rico botín de las calles de Londres, siempre que la percepción y la atención iluminen lo bastante nuestros pasos. Pero creo que para mí han durado mucho tiempo; creo que todavía —terriblemente deteriorados en lo que concierne a cualquier idea romántica cuando los encuentro — estallan en ocasiones con elocuencia, arrojando notas profundas desde su vasto, vago murmullo.

En todo caso, hubo un momento en que no me ofrecían imagen más vivida que la de una naturaleza individual y sensitiva de mente fina, alguna pequeña, oscura, inteligente criatura, cuya educación se derivara casi enteramente de ellos, capaz de disfrutar de toda la civilización, todas las acumulaciones de las que dan testimonio y condenada, sin embargo, a ver todas esas cosas únicamente por fuera, en mera consideración apresurada, mero deseo, envidia y desesperación. Me parecía que sólo tenía que imaginar un espíritu así, lo bastante atento y lo bastante turbado, y ponerlo en presencia de los que iban y venían, la gran compañía gregaria de los más afortunados que él —todos en la escala en que Londres podía mostrarlos —, para entrar en posesión de un tema interesante. Fue así como llegué a la historia del pequeño Hyacinth Robinson; brotó ante mí del pavimento de Londres. Para poder encontrar su posible aventura interesante, sólo tenía que concebirle contemplando el mismo espectáculo público, las mismas innumerables apariencias que yo había contemplado, y que lo hubiera hecho de forma muy semejante a como los había contemplado yo; salvo por una pequeña diferencia. Esa diferencia sería que, mientras todo aquel enjambre de hechos debería hablar de libertad y holgura, conocimiento y poder, dinero, oportunidades y saciedad, él podría dar vueltas alrededor de ellos, pero a una muy respetable distancia y con todas las puertas de aproximación cerradas en sus narices. Para uno mismo, y en forma muy conveniente, había habido puertas que se abrían, que se abrían a la luz, la cordialidad y la alegría, a buenas y encantadoras relaciones y, si el lugar en conjunto llegaba a pesarle a uno en la conciencia, siempre quedaba el consuelo de saberse partícipe afortunado de la libertad y el bienestar, conocedor de los resortes que esperaban una ligera presión para

hacer retroceder las perspectivas molestas, y dueño de galerías luminosas, adornadas, llenas de gente, que despedían ráfagas de agradables sonidos.

Esa sensación esencial de felicidad estaba allí siempre, y la retirada del horror general no resultaba nunca prohibida; gracias a ello, la relación personal con la formidable masa y peso de las cosas podía aliviarse y amoldarse. Desde un principio se comprendía lo que podría ser conocer Londres de esa manera: una disciplina interesante e inmensa, una educación hecha en los términos más convenientes y placenteros. Pero ¿cuál sería el efecto en el caso contrario, tener tantas cosas maravillosas eternamente a la vista y no poder, sin embargo, llegar a conocerlas de cerca y limitar el conocimiento más próximo a otros asuntos con los que una relación, por íntima que fuera, no podía pasar precisamente por un privilegio? Es verdad que Londres tiene misterios (categorías numerosas de oscuros arcanos) para cada espectador, y supone en parte una exclusión y una debilidad no tener experiencia de las condiciones inferiores, de los modos y tipos más bajos, de la sórdida lucha general, el peso de la carga del trabajo, la ignorancia, la miseria y el vicio. Con todas esas cosas mi atormentado joven habría estado en contacto, y habrían sido para él desde el principio su Londres inmediato y natural. Pero la recompensa de una romántica curiosidad sería llegar a saber lo que el asalto total, el del mundo de su vida diaria y el del mundo de su adivinación y su envidia a un mismo tiempo, podrían haber hecho de él y, sobre todo, qué habría hecho él de ellos. Ya digo que pensaba en él como atormentado, y ése era el punto esencial, comprobar si era posible hacerle sentir lo bastante para que resultara interesante, y sin que ese sentimiento fuera tan fuerte que dejara de ser natural.

En realidad, y de una forma más bien terrible, siempre he encontrado que eso era lo esencial, que las figuras de cualquier cuadro, los agentes de cualquier drama sólo podían resultar interesantes en la medida en que sintieran sus respectivas situaciones, ya que el hecho de que ellos fueran conscientes de la complejidad expuesta constituía para nosotros el lazo de unión con ella.

Pero hay varios grados de sentimiento: el apagado, el débil, el que tan sólo basta y el que pudiéramos decir es meramente inteligente; y el agudo, el intenso, el completo, en una palabra, el poder de tener los sentidos sutilmente alerta y ser responsable del todo. Son los que sienten esta última manera, los que «sacan más» de todo lo que les sucede a ellos y los que, al hacerlo así, nos permiten a nosotros, como lectores de sus memorias y participantes con apasionada atención, sacar también lo más posible. El que ellos estén sutilmente alerta —como Hamlet y Lear, digamos, lo están— constituye toda la intensidad de su aventura, confiere el máximo sentido a cuanto les sucede. Nos preocupamos, nuestra curiosidad y nuestra simpatía se preocupan relativamente poco de lo que le sucede al estúpido, al vulgar, al torpe; si acaso nos preocupamos por ello, y por los efectos que pueda tener, porque contribuye a desencadenar lo que les sucede a quienes se asombran de una manera más profunda, a quienes realmente sienten. Hamlet y Lear, en medio de sus conflictos, están rodeados por estúpidos y torpes, que contribuyen por distintos medios a hacer que se cumpla su destino. De acuerdo con tales principios, en la carrera de mi atormentado joven habrían de tomar parte personas de muy limitado sentido, pero sus propios sentidos no podrían ser limitados, se daría cuenta de tantas cosas y vibraría en tantas ocasiones como yo me atreviera a proponerle.

Quedaría todavía la cuestión de su sufrimiento —del que podríamos pronto cansarnos—, la cuestión de lo que, cercado por todas partes y con los sentidos despiertos, se arriesgaría en tales condiciones a hacer lo que soñaría, intentaría y pondría en juego. El interés de la actitud y de la acción residirían en la imagen y la visión que el protagonista tuviera de ellos, junto con la forma y la intensidad con que repercutieran sobre él. Haría falta, por tanto, un ser inteligente, lo mismo que alguna forma de representar esa inteligencia. Claro que tratar de describir una inteligencia supone, en la mayor parte de los casos, un simple peso muerto con el que tiene que cargar el lector de novelas inglesas, ya que ese lector suele tener la maravillosa facultad de apreciar toda la maraña de las relaciones humanas, sin preocuparse de que resulten inteligibles. El que cuenta una historia es ante todo, y nada menos, el que la escucha y, también, el que la lee, y puesto que ha tenido que sacarla de las peliagudas páginas de la vida, desembarazarla del rudo carácter humano y del texto más o menos peregrino en el que la ha empaquetado, la verdadera esencia del asunto reside en *infundirle* inteligencia. Su atención tiene que basarse en que semejante embrollo ha llegado a ponerse en marcha porque hubo una persona que sintió, y más o menos comprendió, alguna cosa.

Reconozco también, y al planear *La princesa Casamassima* me pareció muy importante reconocerlo, el peligro de llenar demasiado cualquier imaginario y obviamente limitado vaso de conciencia. Si es verdad que las personas enredadas en la vida de una forma trágica o cómica nos permiten apreciar el valor trágico o cómico de su enredo, en la medida en que su lucha aparece como algo medido y dirigido, no es menos verdad que en pasando de cierto punto esa misma precisión puede echarlas a perder. Pueden estar demasiado bien dirigidas para que las creamos, nos compadezcamos o nos riamos de ellas. Puede p a recemos que saben y sienten demasiado, no para ser notables pero sí para ser naturales, para conservar las

necesarias afinidades con nuestra propia condición siempre expuesta, por fortuna, a caer en una trampa o quedar desconcertada. Es muy probable que si no fuésemos capaces de quedar desconcertados no habría tampoco nada que contar sobre nosotros. Participaríamos entonces de la naturaleza superior de los inmortales omniscientes, cuyos anales son terriblemente aburridos, mientras que los de los atolondrados mortales, para alivio de los habitantes del Olimpo que andan mezclados con ellos, no lo son. Ésa es la razón de que el lector precavido advierta ante todo al novelista del peligro de hacer que sus personajes *interpreten* demasiado bien el barullo del destino o, en otras palabras, que sean demasiado divinos, pedantemente listos.

«Danos desconcierto a manos llenas —parece decir el monitor—, siempre que haya también un buen desbrozo en el propio desconcierto. Pero lo que sí te suplicamos es que no nos des demasiada inteligencia, porque la inteligencia entraña un peligro, pone en peligro, no al que desbroza quizá, pero sí al propio desbrozo, al asunto mismo de cualquier historia que se respete. Deja paso a demasiadas consideraciones, posibilidades, salidas; puede conducir al desbrozador a regiones tristes en las que el desbrozo parece que falla y se viene al suelo».

Ése es un razonamiento que está muy bien por parte del lector que, sin embargo, puede no tener ni idea —o no le sería tan fácil hacer discriminaciones— de la tremenda dificultad que supone para el pintor de la amalgama humana llegar a poner esa amalgama a derechas.

«Danos en las personas representadas, los objetos del desconcierto (ese desconcierto sin el que no habría desenlace posible ni podría haber intriga, condición primordial en toda historia), tanta experiencia como sea posible, pero rebaja los términos en que das cuenta de esa experiencia porque sólo entendemos los que son muy sencillos».

Ésas son en efecto las palabras con que el escritor se ve continuamente interpelado, el ruego que le hacen las presuntas víctimas de su conjuro en nombre del principio soberano de la economía de interés, un principio sobre el que su instinto es especialmente fuerte. Él escucha con ansiedad los cargos —nada puede sobrepasar su propia solicitud por la economía de interés—, pero se ve perdido ante un abismo de ambigüedades, cuya acomodación el lector deja enteramente en sus manos. La experiencia —en mi opinión — es la comprensión y la medida que tenemos de lo que nos sucede como seres sociales, y cualquier relación inteligente de ella ha de basarse en esa comprensión. Lo que se necesita es el cuadro de la enmarañada situación expuesta, y es sabido que siempre hay muchos motivos para rebajar las complejidades de un cuadro. Pero a pesar de todo siempre tendrá que ser un cuadro y, al tener tal condición, tendrá que referirse a lo que constituye su tema, de modo que el simple recurso de rebajar más y más puede no servirnos para llegar al fin y, quizá, ni siquiera al medio. Una de las maneras recomendadas de rebajar es no atribuir sentimiento o sentimientos a personas que probablemente no tienen ninguno de qué hablar. Cuanto menos espacio ocupen sus sentimientos dentro del cuadro, más espacio quedará para sus acciones, una afirmación que puede pasar por el non plus ultra de la economía.

Todo lo cual resultaría encantador, y mucho más todavía si la ambigüedad no abriera en seguida la boca; lo ilusorio que resulta establecer una distinción tajante, siempre que el interés de la observación esté en juego, entre acción y sentimiento. En el terreno inmediato de la vida, cuando se trate de hacer algo o de terminar un trabajo, es posible que no haya nada de tanta importancia como cargar todo el peso sobre una u otra cosa, dejando aparte cualquier aspecto subjetivo como secundario e insignificante. Pero el asunto del pintor no es el terreno inmediato de la vida, sino su reflejo, no es el reino de la aplicación, sino el de la apreciación, algo que le obliga a medir sus efectos de otra forma totalmente distinta. Lo que yo cuento de la experiencia de la gente —mi relato como narrador— es esencialmente la apreciación que hago de ella, y no encuentro «interés» en lo que mi héroe, mi heroína o cualquier otra persona puedan hacer si no es a través de ese admirable proceso. En cuanto yo empiezo a *apreciar*, la simplificación empieza a correr peligro: las partes tan claramente distintas de cualquier aventura, cualquier caso de sufrimiento o realización, se funden como una súplica. Y veo que para mí lo que esas personas hacen es lo mismo que lo que sienten; sus sentimientos son lo mismo que su acción; ya que no puedo apreciar el sentido que acompaña a su situación si no llego a intimar con ellas. No puedo llegar a intimar si no comprendo ese sentido, y no puedo apreciarlo si no es a través de la intimidad, lo mismo que no puedo contar nada si no proyecto una luz sobre ello. La intimidad con el comportamiento específico de un hombre, con su caso particular, nos lleva sin remedio a verlo como un todo, y toda limitación arbitraria de nuestra visión nos hace perder la belleza que habíamos pretendido encontrar. Las cosas que un hombre piensa y siente son la historia y el carácter de lo que hace, y en todas ellas es donde se apoya lógicamente la intensidad. Sin intensidad ¿dónde está la viveza?, y sin viveza ¿qué puede representarse? Si yo he llamado estado de desconcierto al estado en que generalmente se encuentran mis figuras más expuestas y combatidas —la condición sobre la que tanto

insiste Thackeray en interés de lo que les sucede a las *suyas*, la condición de un corazón humilde, de una cabeza inclinada, un asombro paciente o un juicio en suspenso, ante la «terrible voluntad» y los misteriosos decretos de la Providencia— parece que tiene poco sentido hablar de librarse sencillamente de presentar esa forma de reacción, que es una de las categorías de sentimiento que con más frecuencia se encuentran y una de las más apreciables.

Todo ello pasa así a depender de la *calidad* de desconcierto del personaje creado, la calidad que se deriva de cada caso particular o de los datos que uno aporte. No hay duda de que existen muy distintas calidades, que pueden ir desde la vaga y crepuscular a la más aguda y crítica; y nos basta con imaginar una de este último tipo para comprender cuán fácilmente —desde el momento en que asoma la cabeza— puede reclamar su papel. Nos encontramos entonces con una muestra de sentimiento, de muchos posibles sentimientos, que aparecen tendidos a través de la escena, como un hilo en el que las perlas del interés estuvieran ensartadas. Hay hilos más cortos y menos tensos, y estoy muy lejos de suponer que las que podríamos llamar formas y grados de reacción más bastos, inferiores y menos fructíferos, no puedan también rendir vivísimos resultados. Tienen su propio valor humano, subordinado e ilustrativo esa llamada del tonto, que es a menudo tan penetrante. En realidad, no creo que pueda haber «historia» alguna sin sus correspondientes tontos, como casi todos los mejores pintores de la vida —Shakespeare, Cervantes, Balzac, Fielding, Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, George Meredith, George Eliot y Jane Austen— han demostrado pensarlo. Al mismo tiempo, confieso que soy incapaz de ver el interés esencial de cualquier aventura humana si no es a través de una conciencia (por parte de la criatura conducida y conductora) que permita una intensificación clara y un amplio engrandecimiento. Es cuando aparecen reflejados en esa conciencia, cuando los grandes tontos, los tontos integrales y predestinados, representan su papel para nosotros, ya que por sí mismos tienen mucho menos que mostrarnos. La vida penosa que constituye casi siempre el centro del asunto —cualquiera que sea ese asunto desde el punto de vista artístico— los envuelve y maneja para su diversión o angustia: si los miramos más de cerca, vemos que suelen ser ellos la verdadera causa del trastorno. Eso quiere decir, ni más ni menos, que la persona capaz de sentir con más intensidad que otra lo que debe sentirse en un caso determinado sirve también para *consignarlo*, dramática y objetivamente, en el grado más alto, y es la única persona en quien podemos confiar para no traicionar, despreciar o echar a perder el valor y la belleza del asunto. Por otro lado, cuanto más le importe el asunto a ese individuo, más fácil será para nosotros sacar lo mejor de él, mientras que si cae en manos de otro más obtuso y aburrido, más vulgar y superficial, el cuadro resultará pobre y confuso.

Los grandes escritores siempre se han dado cuenta de ello; han tenido cuidado de introducir una mente —un médium que refleje y avive— dueña de la aventura general (siempre que no sea puramente épica, como en el caso de Scott, Dumas padre o Zola), y en caso de no haberlo hecho han tenido que pagar su fallo con la pérdida de interés. Podemos hacer notar de paso que ese fallo no es casi nunca intencionado ni forma parte de un plan; ha nacido de una curiosidad limitada, de un bajo concepto de la sensibilidad descrita. Edgar de Ravenswood, perseguido por la trágica tempestad de *La novia de Lammermoor*, tiene mucha más capa negra, sombrero y plumas que mente; al mismo tiempo que Hamlet, igualmente negro, ornado y emplumado, y tan romántico al menos como el otro, sigue teniendo mucha más mente que atuendo. La escena que se nos presenta es que Ravenswood ama a Lucy Ashton en medio de terribles dificultades y peligros, y que ella le ama a él de la misma manera; pero la relación que de esa forma queda establecida entre ellos no llega nunca a ocupar el primer lugar, por haber descuidado la cuestión del «sentimiento». La vemos sólo en sus aspectos secundarios, los más confusos y poco sobresalientes, aunque hay que reconocer que se nos presenta, por fortuna, con muy romántica y buena fe. De todas maneras, ha salido perjudicada por esa desviación, por haber sacrificado la intensidad; el centro del asunto queda vacío, y el desarrollo de la obra tiende a llevarlo hacia afuera, hacia el marco que es, desde luego, realmente rico y curioso. Pero menciono aquí la relación que existe entre esos dos aspectos en una obra particular, y sólo como un caso sumamente negativo; he visto otros muchos casos en que puede resultar positiva. Es verdad que el héroe de Fielding, en *Tom Jones*, no muestra mayor finura ni intimidad de la que puede esperarse de un joven con mucha salud y vitalidad, pero sin pizca de imaginación; el secreto está en que su sensación de desconcierto se presenta siempre en el plano cómico, nunca en el trágico. Tiene tanta «vida» que, en lo referente al efecto cómico y satírico, casi equivale a que tuviera una mente, es decir, a que tuviera reacciones y plena conciencia. Aparte de que su autor, que sí dispone de una hermosa mente, sabe reflejar con tal amplitud al personaje y todo lo que le rodea, que le vemos envuelto en la madurez del viejo y agudo moralismo de Fielding, en su humor, igualmente viejo y fino, y en su hermoso estilo antiguo, lo que en cierta manera engrandece a cada personaje y hace que todas las cosas resulten importantes.

Todo lo cual me lleva a comentar el gran interés que he tenido, al leer *La princesa Casamassima*, en

comprobar una idea que mantengo desde hace tiempo: que la claridad y la concreción de una obra dependen de que logremos concentrar su significación en una personalidad individual. Aquí esa significación va en la mente del pequeño Hyacinth, que aparece espoleada al máximo, ya que es su vida misma la que depende de lo que él consiga hacer y, como he insinuado antes, es el afán de su inteligencia el valor más alto que nuestra curiosidad y simpatía encuentran en él. Pero aunque sea el más alto, no es en modo alguno el único, pues la verdad de un joven «de libro» no reside en que tenga una sensibilidad exquisita o una inteligencia brillante. Reside en que tenga la cantidad suficiente de esas cosas y que no resulte desproporcionada con la otra, con la que corresponde a las demás facetas de su situación y carácter. Si es demasiado sensible y demasiado listo para *ellos*, si sabe más de lo que esperamos o de lo que parece natural para *él* es como si no existiera, como si fuera falso e imposible. Tarea extremada y atractiva siempre la de fijar en cien puntos distintos el límite hasta donde nuestro *bonhomme* puede sentir y «saber» bastante —o estar en camino de aprenderlo— para alcanzar su máximo valor dramático, sin llegar a sentir o saber demasiado para perder verosimilitud y no poder fundirse en la fábula. Ésa es la eterna cuestión, el emocionante y atormentador detalle que *hay que poner bien*, con tanto tejer hilos de plata y golpear clavos dorados; y quizá recibiera yo una satisfacción demasiado grande —suponiendo que las satisfacciones del artista no fueran pura fantasía— si intentara atisbar semejante acierto, ya fuera en mi propia obra o en la de los demás. No hay duda de que en cualquier obra esos momentos felices son los menos frecuentes, pero tan valiosos que sólo con que podamos descubrir alguna traza de ellos sirven para ennoblecer el resto de la obra.

Yo, por ejemplo, siento una auténtica debilidad por el esfuerzo que hace George Eliot con Adam Bede, Felix Holt y Tito Melema, con Daniel Deronda y Lydgate en *Middlemarch*, con Maggie Tulliver, Romola, Dorothea Brooke o Gwendolen Harleth; el esfuerzo por demostrar que sus aventuras y su historia —el asunto de la autora— están determinadas por sus sentimientos y por la naturaleza de su mente. Sus emociones, su conciencia moral, su espoleada inteligencia pasan a convertirse, a través de una lectura atenta, en nuestra propia aventura. Ya sé que a la creadora de Deronda y Romola se la ha acusado varias veces —y al tratar a esas mismas celebridades también— de haber hecho a sus figuras, el hombre o la mujer concretos, demasiado abstractos por la cantidad de alma infundida en ellos, pero semejantes fallos, siempre que la imaginación y el humor les acompañen, tienen a menudo un interés que no encontramos en la agitación que es puramente superficial o que podría darse por descontada. Me atrevería incluso a darme el gusto de repasar cada una de mis obras para buscar el juego de esa disposición instintiva, descubrir aquí y allá, desde *Roderick Hudson* a *La copa dorada*, esa reserva de interés que se obtiene al colocar en situación ventajosa, justo en el foco de la luz, el espejo más pulido y que mejor pueda reflejar el cuadro. Rowland Mallet, en *Roderick Hudson*, es precisamente ese espejo, aunque no sea nada autobiográfico ni haga el papel de «primera figura». Y podría aportar toda una lista de ejemplos: desde una «mente» como la del superobjetivo Newman en *El americano*, la fantasía acalorada de Isabel Archer en *Retrato de una dama* (donde el verdadero enredo reside en su imaginación), hasta ejemplos tan inconfundibles como el de Lambert Strether en *Los embajadores* (espejo de plata de ley él mismo y muy significativo en mi opinión), el de Merton Densher en *Las alas de la paloma*, y el del príncipe, en la primera, y la princesa en la segunda parte de *La copa dorada*. Señalaría hasta qué punto todas esas personas, siempre que sus otras pasiones se lo permitan, *perciben* con claridad su situación respectiva, y podría encontrar otros cincuenta ejemplos más; hasta el indeciso Vanderbank de *La edad ingrata*, cuyo tormento y perdición es la vivacidad que tiene para darse cuenta de las cosas; o la Fleda Vetch de *Los tesoros de Poynton*, que gracias a su visión delicada de las cosas nos permite apreciar todo el valor humano de su circunstancia; la institutriz, testigo de los horrores de *Otra vuelta de tuerca*, o la niña inocente que trata en vano de recomponer los que encontramos en *Lo que Maisie sabía*; y por último, ya que son tan pocos los que puedo poner, el guardián desleal de una leyenda que ha crecido demasiado, en *El lugar de nacimiento*, o el desgraciado artista de *La próxima vez*, intentando librarse de su finura para sobrevivir y volverse más torpe para dar en el clavo, o Brooksmith, el mayordomo desventurado, que se pierde por hablar bien y se ve excluido del servicio doméstico por haber aprendido a fijarse en las cosas y tener la virtud de comprenderlas. Pero aunque el comentario sobre un vicio tan arraigado —ya que por vicio habría de pasar— pudiera resultar divertido, los ejemplos que pudieran aducirse deben esperar su turno.

En cualquier caso, y durante mucho tiempo, había tenido ante mí a aquel oscuro chiquillo que observaba con ardor el «mundo de Londres»; le había visto ir de acá para allá, maravillarse ante algunas cosas y anhelar otras; podía imaginar todas las preguntas sin respuesta y todas las pasiones frustradas que nacerían en él en cuanto hubiera conseguido hacerle lo bastante inteligente y lo bastante «desheredado». Pero esta imagen, aunque interesante en sí misma, no suponía tener ya una acción y una progresión, no era

suficiente para crear un drama. La acción —sin la cual lo que uno tiene no es nada— se me ocurrió de pronto, al darme cuenta de que el sentimiento que me embargaba podía desarrollarse y engendrar un estado distinto; podía, en un momento dado y con la mayor vivacidad, volverse sobre sí mismo. Eso era como tener ya el tema en el bolsillo, sobre todo en cuanto se introdujera algún detalle más. Vuelvo a recordar ahora y, con todo lo que pueda tener de «divertido», a revivir, en qué forma se me ocurrieron, como si me los hubieran revelado e impuesto, el aspecto particular, el oficio y todas las demás características de mi presuntuoso personajillo, con aquella mezcla de finura natural y de adversidad fortuita, su caudal de turbias asociaciones londinenses y un espíritu inquieto, destinado a ser escenario de su extraña aventura. Con la imaginación abierta a un millar de estímulos y sugerencias, una fuerte revolución interna será para él la mejor forma de entrar en relación con el destino. La envidia que siente por todo lo que ofrece la vida y él puede apenas probar, la rabia que le consume y le lleva a abrazar unas convicciones sociales agresivas, con deseos de venganza y destrucción, su decisión de recurrir a la «traición, la estratagema y el saqueo», podrían darnos un cuadro tan vivo como quisiéramos, pero sólo llegarían a conmovernos con ayuda de otra complicación más profunda, algo formidable e impuesto.

La complicación más interesante sería que se enamorara de la belleza del mundo, del mundo que realmente existía, y justo en el momento en que más odio sentía hacia la famosa «iniquidad de sus condiciones sociales». Su postura de enemigo irreconciliable y jurado del orden establecido resultaría falsa bajo la fuerza de algo más personal que sus opiniones y promesas, y se transformaría así en su tormento más agudo. Para que fuera un verdadero tormento tendría que haberse visto atrapado, conducido al lugar que ocupaba, por la presión de un conocimiento más amplio, que parecía imposible de alcanzar y le ponía ante el profundo dilema del conspirador arrepentido y desilusionado. Al haberse metido de lleno en el mundo más que «sombrío» del socialismo militante tenía que desempeñar un papel, un papel que al ceder de golpe su exasperación y aumentar su buen gusto era sólo un absurdo frente a su pasión por la vida, la vida misma, fuera como fuera, que tenía alrededor. Había chapoteado en la política revolucionaria y clandestina, se encontraba metido en ella hasta el cuello, y el punto culminante de su aventura se le presentaría al verse forzado a tergiversar su papel. Resultaba igualmente imprescindible que tuviera alguna relación social —y no sólo socialista— que le abriera la puerta de ese otro mundo tranquilo y civilizado, esa atmósfera más cálida y brillante, que él estaba decidido a minar. Ponerme a buscar esa relación social supuso para mí encontrarme con Christina Light, una figura muy «disponible» que se me había venido a las manos al terminar, diez años antes, *Roderick Hudson*. Había estado perdida en el limbo de esos fantasmas que conjuramos pero no llegamos a exorcizar, y esperaba la ocasión de situarse, de encontrar un papel y un hueco.

No pretendo trazar todos los pasos que, al imputarle un futuro a esa mujer —algo así como vestir su desnudez paciente y aterida—, dieron como primer resultado ponerla en el camino de mi encuadernador. No hay nada que nos invite a llegar más lejos, ni con mayor comodidad, que la ocasión de estudiar esa ley misteriosa por la que ciertos personajes de un novelista —ya más o menos honrosamente enterrados— tienen la fuerza o el capricho de revivir, ponerse otra vez a dar vueltas alrededor de su casa, palpar las viejas puertas y las aldabas enmohecidas que conocían, y pegar su cara pálida, desde la oscuridad de fuera, a las ventanas iluminadas. Confieso que desconfío de ellos generalmente; creo que el personaje que ha podido de verdad expresarse ha cumplido ya el encargo que tenía encomendado y no siente ningún deseo de intentarlo otra vez. ¿Por qué la princesa del momento culminante de *Roderick Hudson* iba a tener ganas de hacerlo si no era para atestiguar que no se había sacado de ella todo lo que podía dar de sí? Seguir estando presente me había parecido siempre su pasión dominante: seguir presente a cualquier precio, sin consentir verse relegada a la tumba de cartón, a la caja de muñecas a la que solemos relegar la marioneta agotada, como si se tratara de una figura yacente sobre la losa de un monumento sepulcral. Yo tenía que comprender que todo ello era sólo fruto de una insaciable vanidad: Christina se daba cuenta de haber causado impresión en el caso anterior, y no podía resignarse a no causarla de nuevo. Era imposible resistir su empuje, por mucho que me preguntara qué la llevaba a aparecer precisamente «allí». Tampoco voy a intentar explicarlo (uno no puede explicarlo todo); bastaba con que yo reconociera el derecho que tenía por haber viajado tanto, haber venido desde aquel lugar tan lejano en el que yo la dejé: eso estaba muy de acuerdo con su carácter, era precisamente lo que le hubiera gustado hacer. Su nota distintiva era la aversión de lo «banal», y nada podía resultar menos banal, en mi opinión, que intervenir en la vida de un encuadernador de Londres, sucio, pequeño y con una sensibilidad y un caudal de opiniones sobre las «cuestiones públicas» envenenados desde su mismo origen.

Tenía que estar algo cansada del mundo, era otra de sus características, y la extravagancia de su actitud ante esas nuevas relaciones debía encontrar su raíz y su razón aparente en la necesidad de experimentar

alguna sensación nueva, sin importar demasiado de dónde viniera. Sentía o creía sentir una preocupación sincera por el «pueblo», por las injusticias, las penas y las ansias que le agobiaban; todo eso eran cosas muy alejadas del mundo en que ella había vivido, y era ahí donde tenía que buscarla, lejos y aparte de los demás (dando ya por supuesto que fuera un acierto haberla escuchado); así su encuentro con Hyacinth podría resultar natural, y debo añadir que pude comprobar con gusto que su experiencia había de ser mucho más decisiva para él de lo que el encuentro con el chico había sido para ella. Tengo que confesar también —es una de las debilidades que pueden aquejar al artista en los momentos difíciles— que tenía la impresión de que si era capaz de darle bastante consistencia a él, apenas tendría ya que preocuparme por la de ella. Puedo añadir además que la resurrección de Christina (y en menor escala la del príncipe y la de la señora Grandoni) me hizo ver con toda claridad lo que supone para el novelista la cuestión de «seguir adelante con un personaje»; lo que Balzac sistemáticamente había hecho por primera vez, y lo que con más o menos ingenio hicieron también Thackeray, Trollope o Zola. No fue poco el placer que saqué entonces de todas estas reflexiones, pero debo hacer una observación: el deseo de resucitar a un personaje puede ser muy plausible por parte del artista, pero si se sigue con mucha frecuencia hay más de veinte razones para temer que produzca un efecto muy distinto sobre los nervios del lector.

En cualquier caso, recuerdo que la sensación de haber conseguido dar a Hyacinth lo que yo llamo consistencia la tuve en Dover, durante algunas semanas que había pasado allí, y no mucho antes del otoño de 1885 y de la aparición de los primeros capítulos de la novela en el *Atlantic Monthly*. Había en aquella época, al final de la explanada de esa ciudad tan alegre, con su castillo en lo alto, unas casas con balcones, soleadas y abiertas a la brisa, a las que había acudido varias veces cuando tenía mucho trabajo. Todo está ahora muy cambiado por las obras gigantescas hechas en el puerto, y Dover ya no es la ciudad ajada, llena de soldados, y resignada con la mejor voluntad a someterse a la ley que baja los humos de los lugares florecientes, pero las casas siguen allí todavía. Haber vuelto a tener últimamente la misma sensación, en el viejo paseo asfaltado y con bancos que está junto al mar, el Canal desde el que se distinguían a veces las costas de Francia, como si fueran un complemento más de la hermosura del conjunto, fue para mí sentir de nuevo, y no sin cierta sorpresa, la extraña confianza que tenía en que todas las partes de mi plan pudieran llegar a encajarse. Ahora esa confianza puede asombrarme, dada la especial verdad y «autoridad» que requerían algunos puntos; pero asombrarse es volver a vivir las razones más hermosas de las cosas, cuando los detalles de la lucha y los roces inevitables han quedado oscurecidos y confusos. La mejor de las razones —para sentir la confianza absoluta de que hablo— era ver que tenía un dominio «personal» y completo de mi asunto, que podía considerarlo fruto directo de la experiencia. Mi plan pedía sugerir la proximidad (allí mismo, junto a nuestra vida en apariencia ordenada) de otro mundo oculto, anárquico y siniestro, que se alzaba con su dolor, su poder y su odio; presentar no los detalles más acusados, sino manifestaciones sueltas, movimientos, sonidos y síntomas vagos, presencias escasamente perceptibles y posibilidades generales que se cernían amenazadoras. Haber adoptado el esquema suponía encontrarse con la cuestión de las «notas» que uno había tomado sobre el asunto, ver en qué dirección iba y hasta dónde había llegado, y responder a esa pregunta —al menos a satisfacción propia— era ver ya el camino abierto.

Mis notas sobre el confuso mundo de la conciencia, a un tiempo manifiesta y encubierta de mi héroe, no eran más que las impresiones y las ideas por mí recogidas, el caudal depositado en mi imaginación por mi sentido de ver y entender a Londres. El mismo plan del libro me había llevado a enfrentarme con el principio sugestivo de la «nota», e iba a servir para que mi punto de vista sobre ella se aclarara de una vez. Cuando uno se había propuesto contar historias y dar testimonio de la escena humana era precisamente por eso, porque desde la cuna había dedicado todas sus energías a tomar «notas». Las tomaba con la misma naturalidad con que podía mirar, sentir, pensar, recordar o tratar de comprender algo. El despliegue de energía había sido continuo y no podía cambiar; lo único que cambiaba eran los objetos y las situaciones que lo ponían en marcha. Las notas eran precisamente lo que uno no había podido nunca dejar de tomar, y el primer resultado de toda nueva experiencia era recordarlo una vez más. He intentado describir la forma apremiante en que mi experiencia viva de Londres —el Londres del observador habitual, el pintor atento o el peatón avizor— me lo recordaba a mí, era como una advertencia que venía a resumir todas mis observaciones. No recuerdo haber pulsado cuerdas, haber llamado a puertas cerradas o haberme esforzado por obtener información «auténtica»; pero sí recuerdo la costumbre de no desperdiciar ocasión de añadir una gota, por pequeña que fuera, al cubo de mis impresiones o de ver, una vez más, que podía sacar algo de él. Acechar a la gran ciudad y entrar a través de la imaginación en ella por tantos sitios como fuera posible, *eso* era informarse, *eso* era abrir puertas, *eso* era pulsar cuerdas, y *eso* era también ponerse a dar gritos al ver a veces la carga que uno se había echado encima.

Recuerdo igualmente haber pensado, cara a cara con la idea de los manejos subterráneos y la afiliación

oculta de Hyacinth, que podía sentirme avergonzado si, con todas las ventajas que tenía —y no había una calle, un rincón o una hora de Londres que no fuera una ventaja—, no era capaz de unir todas las partes sueltas de su vida y formar una semblanza verdadera. Existía siempre la posibilidad de que algún lector con un conocimiento superior al mío discutiera la propiedad de lo que yo había hecho. Pero después de todo, ¿conocimiento de qué? La visión que yo daba de las cosas, con más o menos fortuna, *era* precisamente mi conocimiento. Si conseguía dar vida a aquellas apariencias, ¿qué más podía pedirse? No puedo negar tampoco que para responder a las posibles observaciones irónicas sobre la excesiva licencia, vaguedad y falta de precisión de mi cuadro había pensado ya en la defensa de mi «posición artística». ¿Y no había de tener la suerte de encontrarla al decir que lo que yo más deseaba y lo que me había propuesto demostrar era precisamente que no sabíamos nada, que la sociedad no sabía nada, y sólo podía atisbar, sospechar y tratar de ignorar todo lo que seguía su marcha, subversivo e irreconciliable, por debajo de tan ufana corteza? Yo no podía ocuparme de su verdadero alcance, mi tema tenía otra vertiente muy concreta; pero quizá sí podía mostrar lo que era tener el oído pegado al suelo y sentir el aliento caliente de alguna de las ráfagas que en horas muy distintas parecían escaparse y quedar suspendidas en el aire. En resumen, la enseñanza que se desprendía de todo ello era *ésta*: que si repones a escribir una novela sin llevar en ti mismo la raíz del asunto, si no tienes el sentido de la vida y una imaginación penetrante, no eres más que un pelele ante todo lo que se revela y afirma; pero si cuentas con esas otras armas no estás realmente desamparado, siempre te queda algún recurso, aunque tengas delante un misterio tan hondo como un abismo.

HENRY JAMES

Libro I

I

—Pues sí, yo creo que puedo encontrar al niño, si quiere usted verle —dijo *miss* Pynsent.

Tenía un nervioso deseo de asentir a cualquier sugerencia que hiciera su visitante, a quien miraba como a un elevado y más bien terrible personaje. Para buscar al niño salió de la pequeña salita, que se avergonzaba de haber tenido que mostrar en tal estado de desorden, con patrones de papel sobre los muebles y recortes de tela esparcidos por la alfombra. Salió de aquel hasta cierto punto mal ventilado santuario, dedicado a un mismo tiempo a las relaciones sociales y al simple arte al que había consagrado su vida y, abriendo la puerta de la casa, dirigió sus ojos arriba y abajo de la calle. Iba a ser la hora del té, y ella sabía que en momento tan solemne Hyacinth estrechaba siempre el círculo de sus vagabundeos. Estaba ansiosa e impaciente, febril de excitación y deseos de complacer; no quería hacer esperar a *mistress* Bowerbank, aunque ésta permanecía sentada, solemne y respetable, como si pensara quedarse, y se preguntaba al mismo tiempo si el objeto de sus pesquisas tendría la cara sucia. *Mistress* Bowerbank había manifestado con tanta claridad que encontraba extraordinario por parte de *miss* Pynsent haberse hecho cargo de él gratuitamente y durante tantos años, que la humilde modista, cuya imaginación se echaba a volar con cualquier persona menos consigo misma y que nunca se había ufanado de mostrar una benevolencia ejemplar, empezó de repente a parecer tan absolutamente entregada al niño como había estimado su visitante, y pensaba lo que le gustaría que viniese tan fresco, natural y guapo como a veces se mostraba. *Miss* Pynsent, que parpadeaba confusa mientras vigilaba el exterior, estaba además muy sofocada, en parte por la agitación que le había causado lo que había dicho *mistress* Bowerbank y en parte porque, al ofrecer a la señora un refresco después de tan larga expedición, ella había contestado que no tomaría absolutamente nada si *miss* Pynsent no la acompañaba también. El *chiffonnier*, como Amanda siempre tenía cuidado de llamarlo, entregó una pequeña botella, que había contenido primero agua de colonia y exhibía entonces medio cuartillo de un líquido bellamente dorado. *Miss* Pynsent era muy delicada; vivía a base de té y berros, y guardaba la botellita para casos de apuro. No le gustaba el coñac con agua caliente y uno o dos terrones de azúcar, pero tomó también medio vasito en aquella ocasión, que era tan extraordinaria. El niño a esa hora solía estar plantado frente a la confitería que había al otro lado de la calle, un establecimiento donde lo mismo se vendían revistas que pastillas correosas y caramelos, y en el que se exhibían también tentadores libros de canciones y láminas coloreadas tras los cristales pequeños y sucios del escaparate.

Solía quedarse allí media hora entera, deletreando la primera página de las novelas del *Family Herald* y del *London Journal*, y admirando sobre todo la obligada ilustración en la que los nobles personajes (siempre de altísima cuna) estaban representados para los ojos carnales. Cuando tenía un penique, gastaba sólo una parte de él en un caramelo rancio; con la otra mitad siempre se compraba una canción, con un cromo llamativo en la parte de arriba. Pero en aquel momento no estaba en su puesto de contemplación ni aparecía tampoco por lugar alguno ante la mirada impaciente de *miss* Pynsent.

—Millicent Henning, dime: ¿has visto a mi niño? —*miss* Pynsent dirigió estas palabras a una niña pequeña que, sentada a la puerta de la casa de al lado, cuidaba a una muñeca sucia, con un sombrero de paja roto y un verdadero derroche de pelo oscuro.

La niña levantó la vista mientras mecía a la muñeca y, después de lanzar una mirada en la que el desconcierto era claramente exagerado, contestó:

—No, *miss* Pynsent, no le veo nunca.

—¿Pues no andas siempre trasteando con él, niña mala? —replicó la modista con aspereza—. ¿No estará ahí, en la esquina, jugando a las canicas o brincando por algún sitio? —añadió *miss* Pynsent, tratando de animarla.

—Le aseguro a *usted* que no juega nunca a nada —dijo Millicent Henning con un aire de persona mayor, que echó a perder al añadir—: Y no sé tampoco por qué tiene que llamarme niña mala.

—Pues si quieres que te llame niña buena, haz el favor de ir a buscarle y dile que está aquí una señora que quiere verle ahora mismo.

Miss Pynsent esperó un momento para ver si se cumplía su mandato, pero no obtuvo más satisfacción que una nueva mirada circunspecta que le hizo comprender que la perversidad de la niña era tan grande como la belleza, algo sucia y deslucida, de su insolente carita. Con una exclamación de impaciencia entró de nuevo en la casa y, en cuanto hubo desaparecido, Millicent Henning se levantó de un salto y echó a correr calle abajo, en dirección a una bocacalle. No podrá decirse que me aprovecho de la inocencia de la niñez si digo que el motivo de que la señorita echase a correr no era el deseo de complacer a *miss* Pynsent, sino la tremenda curiosidad que le inspiraba aquella visita en que deseaba ver a Hyacinth Robinson. Quería participar, aunque sólo fuera con la imaginación, en la entrevista que podía tener lugar, y sentía renacer un súbito afecto por el niño, de quien se había separado hacía media hora con notable violencia. No era una criatura demasiado cariñosa ni se sentía muy apegada a ninguno de los que formaban su círculo familiar, mas le gustaba besar a Hyacinth cuando no la rechazaba de un empujón y le decía que era odiosa. Eran precisamente esa acción y ese epíteto los que se había permitido media hora antes, pero comprendió en seguida (mientras fingía ante *miss* Pynsent) que después de todo era lo peor que había hecho en su vida. Millicent Henning no tenía más que ocho años, pero sabía muy bien que podía haber en el mundo cosas bastante peores.

Mistress Bowerbank, con tranquilidad y dando un rodeo, había llegado hasta aquel lugar de la tierra para visitar a su hermana, *mistress* Chipperfield, y estaba contando a *miss* Pynsent, entre sorbo y sorbo de un segundo vasito, toda la historia de su cuñado, que tenía tendencia a la hidropesía, además de una funeraria, negocio que había resultado una bendición porque siempre se podía contar con él. Era una mujer imponente, de hombros altos y aire macizo y dominador, tanto que Amanda pensaba para sus adentros lo difícil que sería hacerle un vestido, y casi le daban vahídos al considerar el número de alfileres que necesitaría. Su hermana tenía nueve hijos y ella siete, y dejaba al mayor encargado de los otros cuando iba a trabajar. En la cárcel sólo trabajaba de día; tenía que estar allí a las siete de la mañana, pero pasaba las tardes en casa, con toda comodidad. *Miss* Pynsent se asombraba de que hablara de comodidad con una vida semejante, pero comprendía muy bien que se alegrara de no tener que ir por la noche, porque a esas horas la cárcel debía de ser mucho más espantosa.

—¿Y no tiene miedo de ellas… alguna vez? —inquirió mirando a su visitante con la carita sofocada.

Mistress Bowerbank, que era muy lenta, la contempló tan detenidamente antes de responder, que la hizo sentirse, hasta un grado alarmante, en presencia de la ley, porque, ¿quién podía estar más próximo a la administración de justicia que una mujer carcelera, y más si era tan alta y majestuosa como ella?

—Espero que sean ellas las que tengan miedo de mí —declaró al fin, y fue una idea que a *miss* Pynsent no le costaba nada comprender.

—Y supongo que por la noche se enfurecerán de un modo espantoso —sugirió la modista, que tenía el vago presentimiento de que las cárceles y los manicomios venían a ser la misma cosa.

—Bueno, si lo hacen, las hacemos callar —replicó *mistress* Bowerbank, más bien amenazadora.

Miss Pynsent acudió otra vez a la puerta por ver si aparecía el niño, pero no obtuvo resultado, y comentó con su huésped que era verdaderamente raro que el niño no viniese, porque casi todos los días de la semana sabía muy bien cuándo era la hora del té. A lo que respondió *mistress* Bowerbank, poniendo otra vez ante su compañera el astro de la justicia:

—¿Y viene a tomar el té así, como un caballerito?

—Bueno, yo trato de servírselo como es debido y a la hora conveniente —se disculpó *miss* Pynsent—, y podría decirse que en lo tocante a eso, *es* un verdadero caballero —añadió esforzándose por suavizar las cosas, aunque pronto pudo darse cuenta de que las había complicado mucho más.

—Hay personas tan tontas que son capaces de decir cualquier cosa. Si son los padres los que establecen tu posición social, el niño no tiene mucho que agradecer —añadió *mistress* Bowerbank, como mujer acostumbrada a mirar las cosas de frente.

Miss Pynsent era muy tímida, pero adoraba la aristocracia, y había algunos detalles en la vida del niño que no pensaba sacrificar ni siquiera ante una persona que tenía el poder de hacer rechinar cerrojos y resonar cadenas.

—Creo que no debemos olvidar que su padre ocupaba un lugar preponderante —observó casi suplicante y estrujando con las manos la falda.

—¿Su padre? ¿Y sabe alguien quién era su padre? Supongo que no pretenderá tener un padre, ¿verdad?

—Pues claro que sí, ¿no se demostró que lord Frederick…?

—Querida señora lo único que se demostró fue que ella le pegó a su señoría una puñalada en la espalda

con un cuchillo muy largo, que murió a consecuencia de la cuchillada y que a ella la condenaron con todas las agravantes. ¿Qué quiere usted que sepa de padres una pieza como ésa? Cuanto menos se hable de los antepasados del niño, mejor.

Esa versión del caso dejó a *miss* Pynsent sin aliento, porque echaba abajo de golpe todo el edificio que había montado durante años. Por eso, al oírlo desplomarse, no pudo evitar un intento de salvar al menos parte de los materiales:

—Sí, sí —jadeó—, la verdad es que ella nunca tuvo nada que ver con nadie si no era con la nobleza.

Mistress Bowerbank contempló a su huésped con una mirada inexpresiva:

—Querida señorita mía, ¿qué puede saber un cuerpecito tan respetable como el suyo, que se pasa el día con la aguja y las tijeras, de los manejos de una extranjera baja y perversa y que anda por ahí con un cuchillo? Yo estaba allí cuando la llevaron y sé en qué había acabado. Le aseguro que su conversación era escogida.

—¡Huy! Todo esto es espantoso, pero yo no conozco ningún detalle —dijo *miss* Pynsent temblando—. Ella no era una persona baja cuando trabajábamos juntas en el mismo sitio, y me dijo muchas veces que no haría nada por nadie que no estuviera en la cumbre.

—Pues podía haber hablado de algo que fuera mejor para las dos —comentó *mistress* Bowerbank, mientras la modista se sentía increpada en pasado y en presente—. ¡En la cumbre, pobrecilla! Pues ha ido a parar a lo más bajo ahora. Si no era una persona baja cuando trabajaba, es una lástima que no se quedara quietecita en su trabajo; y en cuanto a lo de estar orgulloso de su cuna, le recomiendo a su amigo que deje ese capítulo para otros. Más le valdría a usted creerme a mí, que soy una mujer de mundo.

Y vaya si lo era, pensaba *miss* Pynsent, para quien todo aquello resultaba cruel, metiendo la fría ley del sistema penal sobre un tema tan confuso, pequeño y querido. Se preocupaba por el niño porque tenía instinto maternal, y aquélla era la única manera en que la fortuna le había permitido ser madre. Había tenido ella misma tan pocos recursos como el niño, y le parecía que podía darle cierta importancia, en el pequeño mundo de Lomax Place y, mientras nadie supiera de dónde venía, contribuir a su mantenimiento. Su propio aislamiento la llevó hacia el niño y, en el curso de los años, su soledad compartida se vio poblada de un centenar de imágenes consoladoras, gracias al romanticismo de la modista. El niño no daba tampoco señales de ser un réprobo o un zoquete, pero lo que más la encariñaba con él era saber que pertenecía, «por la mano izquierda», como había leído en una novela, a una estirpe antigua y orgullosa, cuyos anales había recorrido, ávida y temblorosa, en un voluminoso libro rojo, un día que fue a llevar un vestido a una señora y la dejaron sola en la salita. Inclinó la cabeza ante la lógica abrumadora de *mistress* Bowerbank, pero seguía sintiendo en lo más íntimo que no iba a prescindir del niño sólo por no poder contestar a unas palabras —a las que desde luego no podía contestar— ni iba a dejar de creer en él o de reconocer y venerar las cualidades de quienes eran mejores que ella. Para *miss* Pynsent creer en Hyacinth significaba creer que *era* hijo de lord Frederick, hombre sumamente inmoral. Desde que era muy pequeño le había hecho comprender que había grandeza en su pasado, y como era seguro que *mistress* Bowerbank no iba a dar su aprobación a tales aberraciones rezaba porque no hiciera preguntas sobre esa cara del asunto. Eso no significaba que la modista no supiera mentir cuando llegaba el caso; era una criatura de lo más bueno e inocente, pero soltaba trolas con la misma facilidad con que ponía trencillas. Pero no había sufrido nunca un interrogatorio ante un emisario de la ley, y su corazón empezó a latir con más fuerza cuando *mistress* Bowerbank, en tono profundo y un poco de sopetón, preguntó:

—Y dígame, *miss* Pynsent, ¿el inocente niño lo sabe?

—¿Que si sabe algo de lord Frederick? —balbució *miss* Pynsent.

—¡Deje en paz a lord Frederick! Que si sabe algo de su madre.

—¡Huy! Eso no puedo decirlo. Yo nunca se lo he contado.

—Pero ¿se lo ha contado alguna otra persona?

La respuesta de *miss* Pynsent a esa pregunta fue más rápida y segura; tuvo al contestar la agradable sensación de haberse portado con una sagacidad y un tacto extraordinarios:

—¿Cómo iba a saberlo nadie si yo nunca he dicho ni una palabra?

Mistress Bowerbank no manifestó elogio alguno, se limitó a depositar el vaso vacío y a limpiarse la boca con mucha propiedad y detenimiento. Luego, como si fuera la más reconfortante idea que pudiera expresar, comentó:

—Bueno, ya podrá recibir más adelante toda la información que desee.

—Pido a Dios que pueda vivir y morir sin llegar a saberlo —exclamó con vehemencia *miss* Pynsent.

Su compañera la contempló con cierta paciencia profesional:

—No sabe usted lo que dice. ¿Cómo va a ir a verla si no tiene que enterarse?

—¿Quiere usted decir que a lo mejor se lo cuenta ella? —suspiró *miss* Pynsent.

—¡Decírselo! Si no va a necesitar que se lo digan en cuanto le coja y le dé… lo que a mí me dijo.

—Lo que dijo… —repitió *miss* Pynsent con los ojos de par en par.

—El beso que ha estado deseando darle durante todos estos años.

—¡Ay, pobre mujer! —murmuró la modista, que volvía a sentirse invadida por la pena—. Desde luego se dará cuenta de que le quiere —comentó con naturalidad, y añadió luego en un momento de inspiración más brillante—: Podríamos decirle que es su tía.

—Si le apetece, podría usted decirle que es su abuela, pero no vamos a adelantar nada; todo queda en la familia.

—Sí, eso es verdad —dijo *miss* Pynsent casi sin darse cuenta, y preguntó luego buscando desahogarse—: ¿Y seguirá hablando francés? En ese caso no la entendería.

—Un niño entiende a su madre hable lo que hable —replicó *mistress* Bowerbank, que no estaba dispuesta a administrar consuelos; pero añadió luego otra cosa, algo que abría la puerta a una decisión, no exenta de peligros—: Claro que todo depende de usted. No necesita llevar al niño si no quiere. Habría muchas que no lo harían. No es obligación.

—¿Y no me harían nada si no lo hiciese? —preguntó la pobre *miss* Pynsent, que no podía librarse de la idea de que era el brazo de la ley el que estaba extendido frente a ella.

—Lo único que podría pasar es que él se lo echase en cara más tarde —observó la dama de la prisión desde un sombrío punto de vista.

—Sí, claro, si se enterara de que se lo había impedido.

—Es seguro que se enterará cualquier día de éstos. Lo vemos muchísimas veces, las cosas son así —comentó *mistress* Bowerbank, que parecía tener provisión de alegres contingencias—. Tiene usted que pensar que es su último deseo y que puede caer sobre su conciencia.

—Eso no podría *nunca* soportarlo —exclamó la modista con énfasis y temblando visiblemente; luego se puso a recoger los trozos de tela y papel esparcidos y empezó a enrollarlos a toda prisa—: Es espantoso no saber qué hacer… si está segura de que se está muriendo.

—¿Quiere decir que finge? De ésas tenemos muchas, pero sabemos cómo tratarlas.

—¡Santo Dios! Eso ya me lo imagino —murmuró *miss* Pynsent.

Mistress Bowerbank siguió diciendo que la infortunada por quien había emprendido tan solemne peregrinación podía vivir una o dos semanas, pero que si vivía un mes entero violaría todas las leyes de la naturaleza porque se había quedado en los huesos y no tenía más deseo que el de ver a su hijo.

—Si tiene miedo de que hable, la verdad es que no va a ser mucho lo que pueda decir. Y no vamos a permitirles que estén con ella más de unos ocho minutos —prosiguió *mistress* Bowerbank, en un tono que parecía reflejar una disciplina de hierro.

—Estoy segura de que no voy a necesitar más, y aun voy a tener de sobra para muchos años —dijo *miss* Pynsent conciliadora. Luego añadió, en otro momento luminoso—: ¿Y no cree usted que podría echarme en cara que le hubiera llevado? Podrían hablarle de ella más tarde, pero si no la había visto, también podría no creerlos.

Mistress Bowerbank meditó unos segundos como si se tratara de un intrincado argumento, y dijo por fin fiel a su línea pesimista:

—Hay una cosa de la que puede estar segura: sea lo que sea lo que decida hacer, en cuanto crezca le hará desear a usted haber hecho lo contrario.

—Pues entonces me alegro de que falte mucho tiempo.

—El tiempo que tarde en metérsele en la cabeza. En todo caso, debe hacer lo que mejor le parezca, pero tiene que tener en cuenta que si va tiene que hacerlo antes que sea demasiado tarde.

—Es imposible decidir.

—Claro que lo es —afirmó *mistress* Bowerbank con soberbia serenidad.

Y mostraba una expresión más tranquila y severa que nunca al envolverse en su chal y decir a *miss* Pynsent que le estaba muy agradecida por su amabilidad y que se sentía muy reconfortada, algo de lo que su visita había privado sin remedio a la modista. *Miss* Pynsent expresó toda su perplejidad al exclamar:

—Si pudiera esperar un poco y ver al niño, estoy segura de que podría juzgar mejor.

—Querida señora, yo no quiero juzgar; eso no es asunto nuestro.

No había terminado de decir estas palabras cuando se abrió la puerta y apareció en la habitación un niño que se quedó mirándola. La señora fijó en él los ojos un momento y luego, de forma inesperada, dejó escapar un grito:

—¿Es éste el niño? ¡Ay, Dios misericordioso, no *le* lleve!

—¿No le parece tímido y cariñoso? —preguntó *miss* Pynsent que se había lanzado sobre él y apelaba ansiosa a su visitante, manteniéndole a cierta distancia—: ¿No es un niño distinguido y delicado, digno de figurar en cualquier sitio?

Por delicado que fuese, la modista le sacudió de lo lindo por haber sido travieso y por no estar allí cuando hacía falta, y le condujo después ante aquella señora de cara cuadrada y voz profunda que ocupaba con su volumen la mitad de la habitación. Pero *mistress* Bowerbank no le puso la mano en la cabeza; se limitó a dejar caer su mirada desde tan formidable altura, dando la impresión de que se abstenía de tocarle en honor de aquella fragilidad en la que tanto insistía *miss* Pynsent, y manifestando, al no perder la calma, que comprendía perfectamente que la pobre mujer no supiera qué hacer con él.

—Háblate a la señora, dile que sientes mucho haberla hecho esperar.

El niño se mostraba dudoso e inspeccionaba también con interés a *mistress* Bowerbank; después, con una indiferencia consciente y fría, que *miss* Pynsent reconoció en seguida como aristocrática, comentó:

—Yo creo que no ha podido tener mucha prisa.

Había ironía en sus palabras, porque es necesario decir que, a sus diez años, Hyacinth Robinson era ya irónico; pero la aludida, que no era muy aguda, pareció no saber interpretarlas y se limitó a decir a *miss* Pynsent:

—Es su misma cara, aunque la constitución es distinta.

—¿La cara de *ella*? ¿Y qué me dice usted de la de lord Frederick?

—¡He visto lores que no eran tan exquisitos!

Miss Pynsent había visto a poquísimos lores, pero se agarró a la generalización con entusiasmo, dominándose algo porque sabía que el niño las cazaba al vuelo, pero empleando al mismo tiempo un tono edificante para dejar bien claro que podría resultar mucho mejor si tuviese la cara un poco más limpia.

—Habrá sido Millicent Henning la que me ha manchado la cara cuando me dio un beso —comentó muy serio, sin dejar de mirar a *mistress* Bowerbank. No mostraba el menor indicio de estar asustado.

—Millicent Henning es una niña muy mala y va a acabar mal también —dijo *miss* Pynsent con su habitual decisión y, si tenemos en cuenta que la señorita había sido el mensajero, con notable ingratitud.

El niño protestó en seguida contra ese calificativo:

—¿Por qué es mala? Yo creo que no es mala; a mí me gusta muchísimo.

Le parecía que se había dado demasiada prisa en cargar sobre sus hombros la culpa de que él no ofreciera buen aspecto, y quería reparar la traición. Comprendía vagamente que sólo una acusación como ésa podía haberle llevado a hacerlo, porque odiaba a la gente que ofrecía muy pocos espacios limpios, demasiados tiznones y huellas. Millicent Henning solía llevar por lo menos dos o tres, se los prestaba su muñeca, contra la que se frotaba la nariz continuamente y que tenía una suciedad contagiosa. Era inevitable que dejara la marca debajo de su nariz cuando reclamó la recompensa por haber ido a decirle que una señora quería verle.

Miss Pynsent apretaba al niño contra la rodilla para presentarle en debida forma y que *mistress* Bowerbank reconociera que se le notaba la estirpe. Era un niño diminuto aún para su edad y, aunque no llamara la atención por su aspecto enfermizo, parecía llevar escrito en su personilla que no sería nunca alto ni realmente fuerte. Tenía los ojos de un azul oscuro y más separados de lo normal, lo que aumentaba la belleza y dulzura de su cara, y el pelo, largo, abundante y rizado, tenía ese tono dorado que lleva a las señoras a lanzar exclamaciones de entusiasmo cuando hacen el inventario de una criatura. Con sus facciones correctas y su cabeza sostenida por un cuello delgado y recto tenía una expresión seria y limpia, que mostraba a un mismo tiempo viveza e ingenuidad. En conjunto, dentro de su delgadez, era un pequeño personaje interesante y atractivo.

—Sí, es de los que se acuerdan de las cosas —comentó *mistress* Bowerbank, comparándole mentalmente con los burdos miembros de su propia pollada que jamás habían podido acordarse de nada, como no fuera el medio penique que a veces lograban quitarle.

Sus ojos descendieron luego a los detalles del vestido: sus pantalones, cuidadosamente remendados, los calcetines largos y de colores, que ella podía apreciar bien, y el lazo de cinta brillante que la modista le había puesto en el cuello y que la señorita Henning había arrugado con su abrazo. Claro que *miss* Pynsent no tenía que cuidar más que de uno, pero su visitante se vio obligada a reconocer que, en cuestión de botones, no se podía llegar más lejos.

—Le pone usted que da gusto verle —dijo, al ver los ingeniosos remiendos de los zapatos del niño que, en su opinión, estaban tan bien arreglados como los de un pequeño aristócrata.

—Es usted muy amable —observó *miss* Pynsent, en un estado de verdadera exaltación—. Jamás ha entrado en su ropa una aguja que no fuera la mía. Eso es lo que me da miedo: que la impresión iba a ser

muy fuerte.

—Pero ¿sólo me querían para mirarme? —preguntó Hyacinth con una ingenuidad que aunque no fuera estudiada resultaba otra vez satírica.

—¡Si es una amabilidad por parte de la señora llegar a verte! —exclamó su protectora, dándole un ligero meneo—. No abultas más que una pulga; hay muchos que no podrían distinguirte, ni las mismas pulgas podrían hacerlo.

—Ya verá cómo se hace mayor cuando empiece a crecer —observó *mistress* Bowerbank tranquilamente.

Luego añadió que ya que le conocía comprendía mejor que había que tener en cuenta a la otra parte. En su esfuerzo por mostrarse discreta delante del niño (que no perdía detalle) empezaba a volverse enigmática; pero *miss* Pynsent comprendió lo que quería decir, que era que el niño iba a darse cuenta de todo, pero que precisamente por ser tan atractivo era casi un pecado no recompensar a la pobre mujer que, si supiera cómo estaba, no perdonaría jamás a la que había ocupado su puesto, por no dejárselo ver.

—Desde luego, le aseguro que yo, en su lugar, me moriría más a gusto si hubiese visto esos rizos —declaró en un rapto de imaginación maternal que la dejó plenamente satisfecha.

Miss Pynsent, por su parte, veía que a ella iba a dejarla literalmente arada, pero sin una mala semilla capaz de fructificar. Envió al niño arriba, a prepararse para el té y, al acompañar a su visita hasta la puerta, le rogó que tuviera un poco más de paciencia, que esperara uno o dos días a que lo pensara mejor, y que escribiría diciendo lo que había decidido.

Mistress Bowerbank continuaba moviéndose en una región muy por encima de la que ocupaba la pobre *miss* Pynsent con todas sus vacilaciones y timideces, y aquel despego de su visitante le hacía tener una idea aún más alta de su respetabilidad. Las cosas se suavizaron un poco cuando, ya en el umbral, Amanda volvió a gemir inútilmente:

—¿No es una lástima que sea tan mala?

La imponente dama de la prisión recobró aquellos tonos profundos que parecían destinados a resonar por los corredores de piedra:

—¡Le aseguro que hay muchas bastante peores!

II

Miss Pynsent, al quedarse sola, comprendió que estaba completamente trastornada; un desenlace semejante no había entrado nunca en sus cálculos: la naturaleza misma del caso parecía impedirlo. Todo lo que sabía o había querido saber era que en uno de aquellos aterradores establecimientos construidos para casos semejantes su antigua compañera estaba cumpliendo la condena que le habían conmutado por la otra (el horror definitivo), cuando estaba casi con la soga al cuello. Como no había que pensar en que *aquella* concesión fuera llevada más adelante, la pobre Florentine parecía únicamente algo más muerta que los demás, sin una lápida decente que señalara el lugar en que yacía. A *miss* Pynsent no se le había pasado por la cabeza que iba a morir otra vez; no tenía ni idea de cuál era la prisión a que la habían llevado al sacarla de New Gate (quería haberlo borrado de la memoria en interés del niño), no podía imaginar que de aquel silencio y oscuridad saliera otra vez una voz que llegara hasta ella, y mucho menos una voz que se veía obligada a escuchar. *Miss* Pynsent podía haber dicho, ante la visita de *mistress* Bowerbank, que ella no tenía que dar cuenta a nadie; que había recogido al niño (que hubiera muerto de hambre en la calle) sólo movida por caridad, que le había criado, a pesar de lo pobre y precaria que era su propia existencia, sin recibir ni un penique de nadie; que la madre había perdido todos los derechos que pudiera tener, y que eso era lo que había quedado entendido entre las dos —suponiendo que en tan espantoso momento fuera posible entender algo— cuando había ido a verla a New Gate (aquel terrible episodio, nueve años antes, que ensombrecía todavía todos los recuerdos de *miss* Pynsent); había ido a verla porque Florentine la había llamado (un nombre, una cara y una dirección que salían de los años en que trabajaban juntas, próximos todavía, pero cortados bruscamente), había acudido a ella como a la única amiga de quien podía esperar una respuesta piadosa. El efecto que tan violenta emoción produjo sobre *miss* Pynsent no fue el de hacerla quedarse sentada mano sobre mano o empezar a ir inútilmente de un lado a otro; al contrario, ella se lanzó sobre toda suerte de cosas, igual que un fugitivo se habría puesto a buscar atajos, y empezó a cortar, coser e hilvanar como si tuviera que hacer una carrera contra la histeria. Y mientras las manos, las tijeras y la aguja corrían, por su atolondrada cabeza pasaba una procesión entera de fantásticas posibilidades. Tenía una imaginación desbocada, y reflexionar significaba siempre para ella evocar todo un panorama de escenas y figuras. Durante muchos años había tenido ante sus ojos el cuadro que ella misma había pintado del futuro, en tonos más bien rosados; pero de repente tenía la sensación de que la manaza de *mistress* Bowerbank había hecho un agujero en el lienzo. Es de advertir, sin embargo, que aunque los pensamientos de Amanda tendían a extraviarse, algunas veces también sabía recoger velas, y en la tarde de aquel día de septiembre supo llegar a una decisión. La decisión fue pedir consejo, por lo que se lanzó escalera abajo, zarandeó a Hyacinth, que no había terminado de cenar y le mandó al otro lado de la calle a decir a mister Vetch (si no había salido ya para el teatro) que le rogaba que fuera a verla al volver a casa por la noche, pues tenía que decirle una cosa muy especial. Podía ir a cualquier hora, no importaba que fuera muy tarde —ya vería su luz en la ventana— y le haría un grandísimo favor. *Miss* Pynsent sabía que era inútil irse a la cama, estaba convencida de no volver a pegar ojo. Mister Vetch era el amigo más distinguido de la modista, que apreciaba mucho su inteligencia y su conocimiento del mundo, así como la pureza de sus gustos en materia de conducta y opiniones. Por eso le había consultado ya sobre la educación de Hyacinth. El niño no necesitó que le metieran prisa para hacer ese encargo porque él tenía también sus propias ideas sobre el violinista, que era segundo violín en la orquesta del teatro Bloomsbury. Aquel mismo año, y en una ocasión de las grandes, mister Vetch les había dado dos entradas para una pantomima, y la impresión que produjo en Hyacinth aquella tarde de éxtasis le había colocado para siempre entre el brillo dorado de las candilejas. A sus diez años, el niño estaba convencido de que había cosas en la vida de las que no se cansaría nunca, y una de ellas era aquel mundo maravilloso iluminado por las luces del teatro. Pero podía presentarse la ocasión de nuevo, si no se perdía de vista a mister Vetch; podía volver a abrir la puerta, porque era un

hombre privilegiado, un mortal mágico que iba al teatro todas las tardes.

Fue a ver a *miss* Pynsent cuando era casi medianoche, y en cuanto oyó el sonido de la campanilla ella abrió la puerta y le hizo pasar. Era un tipo original en el más amplio sentido de la palabra: un hombrecillo solitario, desengañado, cínico y amargado, que no había podido hacer nada con su música, y tenía los nervios y la sensibilidad de un señor, pero se había visto condenado durante los diez últimos años a tocar el violín por unos pocos chelines a la semana en un establecimiento de segundo orden. Tenía sus propias ideas sobre todas las cosas, y no eran siempre ideas muy alentadoras. Para Amanda Pynsent representaba el arte, la literatura (literatura de cartel) y la filosofía, lo que le daba siempre la impresión de que pertenecía a una esfera social más elevada, aunque sus ingresos no fueran mucho mayores que los suyos y viviera en el cuarto trasero de una casa en la que jamás había visto limpiar los cristales. Tenía para ella el brillo del hombre de buena posición venido a menos, y comprendía que hablaba un lenguaje diferente aunque no podía decir en qué consistía la diferencia, como no fuera que empleaba a un mismo tiempo mayor número de palabras malas y de grandes palabras que los demás, los que componían el círculo humilde, casi suburbano en que ella vivía. La forma de sus manos era también claramente aristocrática, y ya he dicho cuánto le preocupaba a *miss* Pynsent todo lo relacionado con esa condición. Lo único que le disgustaba del carácter de mister Vetch eran sus blasfemas ideas republicanas y la forma licenciosa en que hablaba de la nobleza. Eso la molestaba muchísimo, aunque nunca le parecía estar tan bien relacionado, como le pasaba con Hyacinth como en aquellos momentos en que se horrorizaba más. Esas espantosas teorías (expresadas de una forma tan brillante que hubieran resultado peligrosas si *miss* Pynsent no se hubieran mantenido tan firme en su fe cristiana y conociera tan bien el lugar que le correspondía) no constituían presunción alguna en contra de su origen refinado; se explicaban más bien como un resentimiento justo al encontrarse excluido de la posición que le correspondía. Mister Vetch era bajo, gordo y calvo, aunque no mucho más viejo que *miss* Pynsent, que no era a su vez mucho más vieja que los que decían tener cuarenta y cinco; él iba al teatro siempre de etiqueta, con una flor en el ojal y un monóculo. Parecía un hombre pacífico y amable, y más preocupado de sus camisas que de ninguna otra cosa; se le hubiera podido tomar por refinado y superficial, pero nunca por revolucionario y ni siquiera por un crítico atrevido. Algunas veces, cuando salía pronto del teatro, iba con un pianista amigo suyo a tocar música de baile en pequeñas reuniones; y era precisamente al volver de esas reuniones cuando se mostraba más cínico y sorprendente, cuando lanzaba toda clase de diatribas contra la clase media británica petulante y filistea. Era raro que sostuviese una conversación con *miss* Pynsent sin decirle que no tenía más talento que una oruga, pero eso era sólo un privilegio, después de una amistad de siete años, que había empezado (al año siguiente de llegar él a Lomax Place) cuando fue a cuidarle, al enterarse por la lechera de que vivía en el número 17 y estaba solo en la cama con un ataque de gastritis. Siempre la comparaba con un insecto o un pájaro, pero a ella no le importaba porque sabía que la estimaba, y a ella también le gustaban todas las criaturas que tuvieran alas. ¿Cómo podía protestar cuando le oía decir que la reina era un objeto anticuado y el arzobispo de Canterbury una superstición grotesca?

Dejó el estuche del violín sobre la mesa, que estaba llena de figurines y acericos, y miró al fuego, donde cocía lentamente una cazuela. *Miss* Pynsent, que la había puesto allí media hora antes, comprendió el significado de su mirada y se alegró de que *mistress* Bowerbank no hubiera dejado en seco la botellita del *chiffonnier*. Volvió a ponerla en la mesa, esta vez con un solo vaso, y dijo a su visitante que, como gran excepción, podía encender la pipa. En realidad, la excepción la hacía siempre, y él siempre respondía a sus palabras preguntando si creía que las viudas de los tenderos y las hijas de los carniceros para quien trabajaba tenían la nariz tan fina que podían notar el tufo de su tabaco en las ropas que les mandaba a casa. Sabía que su clientela era sólo de pequeños comerciantes, pero no le gustaba que los demás lo supieran, y deseaba que creyesen que era muy importante que las pobres ropas que cosía (me temo que muy pasadas de moda) no ofendieran las narices femeninas. Pero siempre había sido imposible engañar a mister Vetch; adivinaba la verdad, la verdad traicionera y desnuda, desde el primer momento. Estaba segura de que haría lo mismo ante la pregunta solemne que se le había planteado a Hyacinth; comprendería que, aunque no hubiera dejado de gustarle verse envuelta en los últimos remolinos de un caso que tanto había dado que hablar en su día, su más íntimo deseo era sacudirse aquel deber —suponiendo que *fuera* un deber—; evitar que el niño llegara a conocer la historia de su madre, la vergüenza que iba unida a su origen, y la oportunidad que ella había tenido de dejarle ver a aquella desgraciada antes que fuera demasiado tarde. Sabía que mister Vetch iba a leer sus pensamientos, pero esperaba que los encontrase naturales y justificados; puesto que estaba interesado por Hyacinth, no desearía verle pasar por una mortificación que podría escocerle y hasta destrozarle para siempre. Le contó la visita de *mistress* Bowerbank, mientras estaba sentado en el sofá, en el mismo sitio que había ocupado tan majestuosa señora, y lanzaba bocanadas de

humo en la habitación. Conocía desde hacía años la historia del niño; no necesitaba, por tanto, hacer ninguna revelación sensacional. No pareció impresionarle el anuncio de que Florentine estaba a punto de morir en la cárcel, y se las había arreglado para mandar un mensaje a Amanda; todo ello le parecía tan natural que dijo a *miss* Pynsent:

—Pero ¿esperaba que viviera allí para siempre consumiendo su terrible condena sólo para evitar ponerla ante un dilema y ahorrarle el recuerdo de su miserable existencia, que usted ha preferido olvidar?

Ése era el tipo de preguntas que hacía siempre mister Vetch, y preguntó también a su alicaída huésped si estaba segura de que el mensaje de su amiga (llamaba su amiga a la desgraciada) había llegado por buen camino. Era seguro que los guardianes no tenían autoridad para permitir visitas a los presos, y quería saber si pensaba ir a la cárcel sin más autorización que la de *mistress* Bowerbank. La modista le dijo que aquella señora había ido sólo para sondearla, y gracias a lo mucho que se lo había rogado Florentine. Había estado en la sala de *mistress* Bowerbank antes de trasladarla a la enfermería; en la que se consumía y había comunicado su deseo al capellán, católico que había prometido cumplirlo o averiguar algo por lo menos. El capellán quería estar seguro de que la persona encargada del niño estaba dispuesta a llevarlo, ya que era una cosa puramente opcional, y después de haber tratado el asunto con *mistress* Bowerbank habían convenido entre ambos que, si visitaba a *miss* Pynsent y le explicaba la situación, dejándole siempre entera libertad, él se comprometía a obtener el permiso del director de la cárcel para que se celebrase la entrevista. *Miss* Pynsent vivía en Lomax Place desde hacía catorce años, y Florentine no había olvidado nunca que ésa era su dirección en la época en que fue a verla a New Gate (antes de conmutarle su terrible condena), cuando le prometió, en un arranque de piedad por quien había conocido en sus días honrados y felices, que salvaría al niño, le libraría del hospicio y de quedar en la calle y le evitaría el destino que se había tragado a su madre. *Mistress* Bowerbank, que desde hacía tiempo quería visitar a una hermana suya que vivía en la parte norte de Londres, había aprovechado el medio día libre que tenía y, después de hacer sus trabajos domésticos, se había dejado caer por casa de *miss* Pynsent, de una manera natural y sin ceremonia, y había expuesto ante ella el caso. No se haría más que lo que a ella le pareciera. Debía pensarlo uno o dos días, pero no más, porque la mujer estaba muy enferma, y escribir luego a la cárcel a *mistress* Bowerbank. Si consentía, *mistress* Bowerbank se lo diría al capellán y éste se encargaría de obtener la orden del gobernador y enviarla a Lomax Place, después de lo cual Amanda se pondría en camino con su inocente víctima. Pero ¿debía, *tenía* que consentir? Ésa era la terrible pregunta que la acongojaba y a la que ella sola se veía incapaz de contestar:

—Después de todo, ya no es suyo, es mío, mío para siempre y de nadie más que de mí. ¡Me gustaría saber si con todo lo que he hecho por él no iba a ser mío! —Así se desahogaba Amanda Pynsent, mientras metía la aguja con más prisa que nunca en un trozo de tela sujeto con un alfiler a la rodilla.

Mister Vetch la contempló un rato, aspirando en silencio su pipa, con la cabeza echada hacia atrás sobre el respaldo alto tieso y pasado de moda del sofá, con las piernas cruzadas como si fuera un turco:

—Es verdad que ha hecho usted mucho por él. Querida Pinnie, después de todo, es usted una buena mujercita. —Intercaló «después de todo» porque ésa era su forma de hablar. En realidad no había dudado nunca de que era la mujer más buena que había al norte de Londres.

—He hecho lo que he podido, y no pretendo ponerme por encima de los demás. Pero me parece que la cosa cambia si uno se pone a mirarlo y ve que se trata de llevarle a ver a otra mujer. ¡Y vaya mujer, y en menudo sitio! Yo creo que no debe llevarse allí a un niño inocente.

—Eso no lo sé. Hay quien diría que iba a sentarle bien. Si no le gusta el sitio ahora que es pequeño, puede que ponga más cuidado en no ir a parar allí de mayor.

—Mister Vetch, ¡por Dios!, ¿cómo puede pensar eso? Y de él, un caballerito tan acabado —exclamó *miss* Pynsent.

—¿Es usted quien le ha hecho caballero? —preguntó el violinista—. Pues cualquiera diría que no le viene de familia.

—¿Familia? ¿Qué sabe usted de eso? —replicó vivamente, al ver sobre el tapete su tema predilecto.

—Sí, realmente, ¿quién es el que sabe algo?, ¿qué sabía ella misma? —El visitante de *miss* Pynsent añadió—: ¿Por qué tuvo usted que cargar con él? ¿Por qué quiso ser tan requetebuena? Los demás no lo creen necesario.

—Yo no quise ser requetebuena. Bueno, quiero serlo de un modo general, pero no fue ésa la razón que me llevó entonces a hacerlo. Mire, yo no tenía nada mío, lo único que tenía en el mundo era el dedal.

—Pues a casi todo el mundo le hubiera parecido que era una razón para no adoptar al bastardo de una prostituta.

—Bueno, yo fui a verle al sitio donde estaba (donde ella le había dejado, con la mujer de la casa), vi qué

clase de negocio era, y pensé que era una vergüenza que un pobre niño creciera allí. —*Miss* Pynsent se defendía con tanto empeño como si su inconsecuencia fuera realmente criminal—. Y tampoco hubiera llegado a crecer. *Ellas* no se hubieran molestado mucho por un niño indefenso. Le hubieran jugado alguna mala pasada, aunque no fuera más que mandarle al hospicio. Además, yo siempre he tenido cariño a las criaturas pequeñas, y se lo he tenido a ésta —continuó, consciente de que hacía un esfuerzo de proporciones heroicas por aclarar las cosas—. Los primeros dos o tres años me estorbó bastante, y no fue poco lo que tuve que bregar para atenderlos a él y a mi trabajo al mismo tiempo. Pero ahora es igual que el trabajo: parece que marche solo.

—Pues si marcha como marcha el trabajo, ya puede usted descansar —dijo el violinista con su manía de insertar siempre alguna broma.

—Sí, todo está muy bien, pero eso no hace que cierre los ojos ante esa pobre mujer que está allí suspirando por poder tocar sus manitas antes de irse al otro mundo. *Mistress* Bowerbank dice que cree que voy a llevarle.

—¿Quién lo cree? ¿*Mistress* Bowerbank?

—Me gustaría saber si hay algo en la vida lo bastante santo para que lo tome usted en serio —replicó *miss* Pynsent, arrancando un hilo de muy mal humor—. El día que deje usted de burlarse, me gustaría estar allí para verlo.

—No voy a parar mientras esté usted delante. Qué es lo que quiere que le aconseje, ¿que lleve al niño, o que deje a la madre morirse dando gritos?

—Lo que quiero que me diga es si va a maldecirme cuando sea mayor.

—Eso depende de lo que haga. Pero lo más probable es que la maldiga en ambos casos.

—Eso no lo cree usted, porque también le gusta y también le quiere —dijo Amanda con perspicacia.

—Precisamente por eso; y también va a maldecirme a mí. Va a maldecir a todo el mundo. ¡Buen provecho vamos a sacar del cariño! No será feliz.

—No sé cómo piensa que le educo —observó la modista ofendida.

—Si no le educa de ninguna manera… Es él quien la educa a usted.

—Eso es lo que siempre ha dicho, pero no sabe una palabra. Si quiere decir que hace lo que le da la gana, debería ser feliz. Y no es nada amable por su parte decir que no lo será —añadió *miss* Pynsent en tono de reproche.

—Yo diría lo que más le gustara si supiese que iba a servir para algo. Es un chiquillo picajoso, con poca salud, introvertido y soñador, con mucha imaginación y poca perseverancia, y va a esperar de la vida mucho más de lo que encuentre en ella. Por eso no será feliz.

Miss Pynsent escuchaba aquella descripción de su *protégé* como si la criticara mentalmente, pero en realidad no sabía qué quería decir «introvertido» y tampoco le apetecía preguntarlo:

—Es la persona más lista que he visto después de usted —dijo al momento; porque las palabras de mister Vetch habían tocado el punto que a ella le parecía más notable. En qué consistía ese punto no habría sabido decirlo.

—Muchas gracias por ponerme a mí delante —respondió el violinista, después de dar varias chupadas a la pipa—. El chico es interesante; se ve que tiene cabeza y hasta alma, y en ese aspecto… bueno, yo no diría que es único, pero sí especial. Voy a sentir mucha curiosidad por ver en qué se transforma. Pero también voy a alegrarme mucho de ser un soltero contumaz que nunca se ha dedicado a invertir nada en esa clase de bienes.

—¡Vaya! Resulta usted alentador. Iba a estropearle aún más que yo —dijo Amanda.

—Es posible, pero lo haría de otra manera. No estaría diciéndole cada tres minutos que su padre era duque.

—Yo no he nombrado nunca a ningún duque —exclamó la modista con impaciencia—. No me he metido a detallar rangos ni he hablado de nadie en particular. Jamás he llegado ni a insinuar el nombre de su señoría. Pero a lo mejor sí he dicho que, si llegara a descubrirse la verdad, podría resultar emparentado —como primo o cualquier parentesco por el estilo— con lo más alto del país. Me hubiera parecido mal no dejarle siquiera sospecharlo. Pero siempre he añadido otra cosa, que la verdad no se sabrá nunca.

—¡Pues todavía resulta usted más alentadora que yo! —exclamó mister Vetch. Continuó mirándola con su piadosa y franca sonrisa, y añadió—: Si no va a hacer lo que yo le diga, ¿de qué sirve que siga hablando?

—Le aseguro que lo haré, lo haré si me dice que ése es mi deber.

—Pero ¿suelo yo decir semejantes estupideces? El deber, el deber. ¿Qué tiene usted que hacer con él? Si no quiere guiarse más que por el deber, es usted una persona muy especial.

—¿Y por qué voy a guiarme entonces? —preguntó la modista desconcertada.

—Tiene que guiarse por eso, por bajarle los humos al jovencito.

—¿Bajarle los humos a mi niño?

—Su pobrecito niño se cree la flor de la creación. Yo no digo que haya mal alguno en creerlo: una presunción fina, floreciente y odorífera es el accesorio natural de la juventud y la inteligencia. No digo que haya gran mal en ello, pero si quiere una pauta para saber cómo tiene que tratar al niño, esa que le he dado resulta tan buena como otra cualquiera.

—¿Entonces me aconseja que prepare la entrevista?

—Lo único que quiero es que me dé otro traguito, gracias. Lo que digo es esto: creo que es una gran ventaja conocer lo peor en los primeros años; así no vivimos después en un paraíso estúpido y rancio. Yo lo hice casi hasta los cuarenta, y cuando me desperté estaba en Lomax Place.

Siempre que mister Vetch decía algo que pudiera hacer referencia a una posición anterior más desahogada y distinguida, *miss* Pynsent guardaba un silencio respetuoso y de buen gusto, y ése fue el motivo de que no le contestara entonces, aunque tenía muchas ganas de decir que Hyacinth no era más «presuntuoso» (ése era el término que hubiera empleado) de lo que debía ser, dada su apariencia agradable y sus cualidades reconocidas; y en cuanto a lo de creerse una «flor» de cualquier especie, sabía de sobra que vivía en una casita renegrida, a muchas millas de cualquier buena familia, y alquilada por una pobre mujer que admitía también huéspedes que, como no eran generalmente de los que podían sacarla de apuros, la obligaban a hacer muchos equilibrios para estirar el presupuesto, aunque pareciera otra cosa por el anuncio que lucía en la ventana:

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Pero dio la casualidad de que su compañero, antes de que pudiera hablar, había captado ya parte de su pensamiento, y observó que quizá ella dijera que el niño, en lo que se refería a sus presentes circunstancias, ocupaba ya en el mundo un sitio bastante bajo para que uno no quisiera bajárselo más:

—Pero cuando tenga veinte años él mismo se convencerá de que Lomax Place fue sólo un mal sueño, que sus huéspedes y su costura fueron tan fantásticos como son ahora vulgares, y que cuando un viejo amigo venía a verla por la noche, usted no tenía la costumbre de darle un vaso de coñac con agua. Aprenderá a olvidarlo todo; ya encontrará la forma de hacerlo.

—¿Quiere decir que va a olvidarse, que va a renegar *de mí*? —exclamó *miss* Pynsent, dejando de coser por vez primera.

—Como la persona designada en ese bonito anuncio que tiene usted ahí fuera, decididamente sí. Y también de mí, el violinista calvo y barrigudo que la consideraba la más perfecta dama de las que conocía. No digo que vaya a renegar de usted ni a pretender que no la ha conocido en su vida: no creo que llegue a ser un sujeto tan odioso; no es probable que sea un bribón, y me ha chocado ver en él afecto y hasta gratitud. Pero su imaginación, que va a guiarle en todas las cosas, hará que sufra usted una metamorfosis extraordinaria. La disfrazará.

—¿Que me disfrazará? —gritó Amanda, incapaz de seguir el hilo de la exhibición de mister Vetch—. ¿Quiere decir que entrará en propiedad, que le admitirán sus parientes?

—Deliciosa, querida y tontísima Pinnie, estoy hablando en sentido figurado. No pretendo decir todo lo que hará cuando nosotros quedemos relegados; pero de que estamos condenados a quedar relegados, no me cabe la menor duda. Por eso, no le embuta más ideas falsas ni más ilusiones doradas que las indispensables para mantenerle vivo; encontrará de sobra en el camino. Haga al revés, dele una buena dosis de dura verdad al principio.

—Pobre de mí, desde luego usted ve mucho más allá de lo que yo podría ver en mi vida —murmuró Pinnie, mientras enhebraba la aguja.

Mister Vetch calló un momento; pero, al parecer, no por deferencia ante tan amable interrupción. Luego siguió hablando con cierto sentimiento en la voz:

—Déjele ver el estado en que se halla su cuenta con la sociedad, porque podría serle útil más tarde; puede servirle para actuar de acuerdo con ella. Si es hijo ilegítimo de una francesa que mató a uno de sus numerosos amantes, no le escamotee un hecho tan importante. A mí me parece un origen valiosísimo.

—¡Caramba, mister Vetch, vaya manera que tiene usted de hablar! —exclamó *miss* Pynsent con su inagotable capacidad de protestar en vano—. No sé lo que podría una pensar escuchándole.

—Pues claro, señora mía, y por esta razón: ésa es la gente con quien la sociedad tiene que contar. No tiene que contar para nada con usted o conmigo.

Miss Pynsent soltó un suspiro que podía interpretarse como que estaba plenamente de acuerdo o que mister Vetch tenía la manía de alargar las cosas, sobre todo cuando estaban muy por encima de ella, y el filosófico visitante prosiguió:

—¡Pobre diablillo! Déjele verla, llévele en seguida.

—Y si luego, más tarde, cuando tenga veinte años, me dice que si yo no me hubiera metido en eso no hubiera necesitado saberlo ni pasar nunca por esa vergüenza, haga el favor de decirme, ¿qué digo entonces? Eso es lo que no puedo quitarme de la cabeza.

—Puede decirle que un chico que se lamenta de haber ido a ver a su madre cuando está en sus últimos momentos y llamándole a gritos desde el jergón de una cárcel, merece una pena mucho mayor que la que pueda sentir entonces.

El violinista se levantó, fue hacia la chimenea y sacudió la ceniza de la pipa.

—Bueno, yo estoy segura que sería natural que lo sintiera mucho —dijo *miss* Pynsent, recogiendo su labor con la misma celeridad desesperada que había mostrado toda la noche.

—No tengo el menor inconveniente en que lo sienta mucho; eso no es lo peor del mundo. Si en esta estúpida raza nuestra, embotada y dormida, unas cuantas personas más lo sintieran mucho el mundo podría encontrarse con una o dos ideas, y nosotros podríamos ver que empezaba la danza. Es la aceptación monótona, la falta de respuesta, la necedad impenetrable…

Mister Vetch paró en seco; su amiga estaba delante de él, con ojos suplicantes, las manos enlazadas:

—Venga, Anastasio Vetch, ¡no empiece otra vez con esas teorías disparatadas y horribles! —gritó, siempre enemiga de la gramática cuando estaba conmovida—. Se escapa usted siempre por los aleros. Creía que amaba más… a mi pobre desgraciado.

Anastasio Vetch había guardado la pipa; se puso el sombrero, con la libertad que le daba su vieja amistad y el estar en Lomax Place, y recogió el estuche del violín, que parecía un ataúd:

—Querida Pinnie, me parece que no entiende usted una palabra de lo que digo. No vale la pena seguir hablando, haga lo que le parezca.

—¡Vaya! Pues tengo que decirle que tampoco valía la pena haber venido a medianoche sólo para decirme eso. Si a mí no me parece nada, ¡detesto todo este maldito asunto!

Él se inclinó profundamente para besarle la mano, con el estilo de un trovador y de la misma manera que lo hacían en los teatros:

—Querida amiga, tenemos ideas distintas y no conseguiré jamás meterle las mías en la cabeza. Es precisamente porque le quiero, pobre diablillo, pero no va usted a entenderlo nunca. Quiero que lo sepa todo, y especialmente lo peor, lo peor de todo, como he dicho. Si yo estuviera en su lugar, no le agradecería que intentara hacer de mí un pelele.

—¿Hacerle un pelele?… ¡Como si pensara yo en algo más que en su felicidad! —exclamó Amanda Pynsent.

Estaba mirándole, pero obsesionada con sus propios pensamientos había renunciado ya a comprender sus caprichos. Recordaba lo que había notado en otras ocasiones: que sus ideas eran mucho más extraordinarias que su mismo comportamiento. Si sólo se tenía en cuenta la vida que llevaba, no se pensaba que fuera tan inmoral.

—A lo mejor sí que lo pienso demasiado —comentó—. Quiere verle y lo llama a gritos, y eso es lo que nunca se me olvida a mí.

Cogió la lámpara para acompañarle hasta la puerta, porque la escasa luz del corredor se había extinguido hacía tiempo, pero antes de salir a la calle se volvió de repente, quedóse parado, con una extraña expresión en la cara y una mirada burlona en sus ojos, redondos y pequeños:

—¿Qué importa después de todo?, ¿por qué se preocupa usted? ¿Qué va a pasar por lo que suceda a dos personas tan poco importantes?

III

Mistress Bowerbank le había dicho que se encontraría con ella casi en la puerta misma del espantoso lugar; y esa idea era la que había mantenido a *miss* Pynsent en aquel viaje largo y tortuoso que habían hecho en parte a pie y en parte en distintos carruajes. Había pensado primero en alquilar un coche, pero decidió reservarlo para la vuelta, pues era muy probable que estuviera tan hundida y abrumada por la emoción, que resultaría un consuelo que no pudieran verla. No tenía confianza en que una vez traspasada la puerta de la cárcel fueran a devolverla a la libertad y a sus clientes. Le parecía una aventura tan arriesgada como tenebrosa, y estaba impresionadísima por la ansiedad que veía en la cara del niño que llevaba al lado, que participaba con todo entusiasmo, como lo había hecho en otra ocasión, presente todavía en los anales de *miss* Pynsent, cuando le había llevado a la Torre un sábado sofocante del mes de agosto. Una vez que se había decidido, representaba para ella un terrible problema pensar lo que iba a decirle sobre el viaje que emprendían. Decidió hablar lo menos posible, decir únicamente que iba a ver a una pobre mujer que estaba recluida por un delito cometido hacía muchos años, y que había mandado a buscarla y díchole también que si había algún niño al que pudiera ver —como los niños, cuando son buenos, son tan alegres y tan cariñosos — se sentiría dichosa de que le llevaran con ella. Con Hyacinth era muy difícil andarse con reservas y misterios; quería saberlo todo de todo y disparaba la despiadada luz de sus preguntas sobre la encarcelada amiga de *miss* Pynsent. Ella tenía que admitir que había sido amiga suya (si no, ¿por qué ir a verla?), pero hablaba de su amistad como si fuera muy ligera, a la presa sólo la recordaba porque todos los demás —el mundo era tan cruel— le habían vuelto la espalda, y creyó haber tenido una inspiración feliz al decir que el delito que la había llevado allí había sido el robo de un reloj de oro en un momento de extrema necesidad. El marido de la mujer era malísimo, la maltrataba y la había abandonado. Ella era muy pobre, se veía acosada por todas partes, estaba casi muriéndose de hambre. Hyacinth escuchaba embebido la historia, y luego preguntó:

—¿Y no tenía hijos? ¿No tenía un niño pequeño?

Esa pregunta le pareció a *miss* Pynsent augurio de otras igualmente embarazosas que vendrían después, pero afrontó como pudo, diciendo que la desgraciada víctima de la ley había tenido, hacía mucho tiempo, un niño pequeñín, pero que ya no sabía nada de él. Además, en las cárceles no dejaban tener niños pequeños. Hyacinth replicó que a él sí que le dejarían entrar, porque era ya bastante mayor. *Miss* Pynsent intentaba fortalecer su espíritu con el recuerdo de la otra peregrinación anterior, su visita a New Gate diez años antes. Había podido salir de aquella prueba, y hasta había tenido el consuelo de ver que el fruto de la entrevista había sido provechoso. La responsabilidad, sin embargo, era mucho mayor, pues no se trataba sólo de sus propios temores, sino de la sombra que en la sensibilidad del niño podía proyectar la casa de la vergüenza.

La última parte del camino la hicieron a pie, después de que los hubieran dejado lo más cerca posible del río, y sin apartarse nunca de él (como le habían aconsejado a *miss* Pynsent, en más de una docena de consultas con policías, conductores y tenderos) hasta llegar a un edificio grande y oscuro, flanqueado de torres, que reconocerían en cuanto lo tuvieran delante. Y desde luego lo reconocieron al ver levantarse su mole desde la orilla del Támesis, plantado allí y cubriendo todos los alrededores con sus muros pardos, desnudos y sin ventanas, sus torreras mochas y feas, y un aspecto indeciblemente triste y adusto. A los ojos de *miss* Pynsent resultaba algo tan siniestro y avieso que no dejaba de preguntarse por qué una prisión había de tener tan mal aspecto si era una cosa que se erigía en interés de la justicia y del orden, una especie de protesta alzada precisamente frente al vicio y la maldad. Pero aquella cárcel le parecía tan mala y tan ofensiva como los que estaban dentro: era una injuria a la luz del día, hacía que el río pareciera sucio y ponzoñoso, mientras que la orilla opuesta, erizada de chimeneas, horrendos gasómetros y montones de basura, daba la impresión de ser la zona destinada a poblar las celdas de la cárcel. Miró hacia las puertas,

cerradas y oscuras, y apretó la manita del niño; le costaba trabajo creer que algo tan cerrado, tenebroso y sordo pudiera llegar a abrirse para dejarla entrar, y sentía al mismo tiempo que se le encogía el corazón de pensar que salir de allí iba a ser igualmente difícil. Mientras murmuraba palabras sueltas y sentía deseos de echarse atrás ante la meta de su viaje, ocurrió un incidente que revivió una vez más todos sus escrúpulos y prevenciones. El niño soltó la mano, se puso las suyas a la espalda y, colocándose a considerable distancia, dijo con respeto, pero también con decisión:

—No me gusta este sitio.

—Ni a mí tampoco, hijo —exclamó lastimosamente la modista—. ¡Ay, si supieras lo poco que me gusta!

—Pues entonces vámonos. Yo no quiero entrar.

Hubiera acogido la proposición con muchísimo gusto si, mientras permanecía allí, no se le hubiera presentado con tanta viveza, en medio de sus congojas, que detrás de aquellos muros adustos la propia madre del niño seguía contando los minutos. Estaba viva dentro de aquella inmensa tumba, y *miss* Pynsent tenía la sensación de que ya se habían puesto en relación con ella. Estaban cerca y ella lo sabía; al cabo de pocos minutos podía saborear el único trago de clemencia (excepto el librarla de la horca) que había tenido desde el día de su caída. Unos pocos, poquísimos minutos podrían hacerlo, y le parecía a la peregrina que si su caridad fallaba entonces, las vigilias de la noche en Lomax Place estarían acosadas por el remordimiento, quizá peor. Había allí dentro algo que estaba a la escucha, algo que estallaría con un sonido terrible, un grito o una maldición si se llevaba al niño. Miró la pálida cara del pequeño, consciente de que era inútil adoptar un tono autoritario; le parecía además que no era el momento de hacerlo. Tuvo otra inspiración, y le habló de la misma manera que lo había hecho antes:

—Aquí sólo hemos venido para ser buenos; por eso, si somos buenos, no nos daremos cuenta de que es muy desagradable.

—¿Y por qué tenemos que ser tan buenos si ella es una mujer mala?

—Calla, calla —dijo la pobre Amanda, dirigiéndose hacia él con las manos enlazadas—. Ya no es mala; todo se ha borrado, todo está expiado.

—¿Y qué es «expiado»? —preguntó el niño, mientras ella casi se ponía de rodillas en el suelo para abrazarle.

—Es cuando has sufrido muchísimo, cuando has sufrido tanto, que te has vuelto bueno otra vez.

—¿*Ella* ha sufrido mucho?

—Durante años y años. Y ahora está muriéndose. Prueba de que es muy buena es que quiere vernos.

—¿Quieres decir porque *nosotros* somos buenos? —continuó Hyacinth, dándole un giro al asunto que hizo temblar a su compañera y ponerse a mirar, con toda seriedad, hacia la desolación de Battersea, al otro lado del río.

—Seremos buenos si somos compasivos, si hacemos un esfuerzo —dijo la modista, que parecía levantar los ojos en lugar de bajarlos hacia él.

—Pero si se está muriendo, yo no quiero ver morirse a nadie.

Miss Pynsent no sabía qué hacer, pero la desesperación acudió en su ayuda:

—Si vamos a verla a lo mejor no se muere, sino que la salvamos.

El niño la miró a la cara, con aquellos ojos tan especiales que parecían los de una persona mayor y más fuerte que ella.

—¿Y por qué voy a salvar yo a una mujer así si no la quiero?

—Conque te quiera ella, basta.

Miss Pynsent empezó a ver que estaba emocionado.

—¿Va a quererme mucho?

—Mucho, muchísimo, más de lo que nadie te ha querido.

—¿Más que tú ahora?

—¡Ay! —replicó Amanda—. Quiero decir más de lo que quiere a nadie.

Hyacinth había metido las manos en los bolsillos de sus pantalones ajustados y, con las piernas un poco separadas, contemplaba la cárcel, inmensa y triste. Ella pensaba que casi todo dependía de aquel momento.

—Bueno —dijo por fin—, entraré un momento.

—¡Hijo mío, hijo mío! —murmuró la modista, al tiempo que cruzaban el semicírculo vacío que separaba la puerta de entrada de la poco frecuentada calle. Hizo un esfuerzo por tirar de la campana, que le pareció dura y pesada y, mientras esperaba los resultados de su esfuerzo, el niño preguntó de repente:

—¿Y cómo puede quererme tanto si nunca me ha visto?

Miss Pynsent deseaba que la puerta se abriera antes de tener que dar una respuesta, pero los del interior lo tomaban con calma, y Hyacinth tuvo tiempo de repetir la pregunta. Ella respondió agarrándose al primer

pretexto que se le había ocurrido:

—Porque ese niño chiquitín que tenía hace mucho tiempo también se llamaba Hyacinth.

—Pues es bien raro —murmuró el niño, sin dejar de mirar a la orilla de Battersea.

Un momento más tarde los dos se encontraron metidos en una vasta penumbra interior, mientras un ruido de llaves y cerrojos resonaba detrás de ellos. A partir de entonces, *miss* Pynsent se puso en manos de la Providencia, y no recordaba después nada de lo que le había sucedido hasta que la humanidad de *mistress* Bowerbank se alzó amenazadora en la estrechez de un extraño y oscuro corredor. Hasta entonces sólo había tenido la confusa impresión de verse rodeada por altas paredes negras, cuya cara interior resultaba todavía más aterradora que la otra, la que daba sobre el río; de haber pasado por patios de piedra grises en los que algunas figuras horribles, que apenas parecían mujeres, daban vueltas en círculo, vestidas con uniformes oscuros y monstruosos y unas capuchas que daban miedo; de haber trepado por una escalera oscura, siguiendo los pasos de una mujer que había tomado posesión de ella en el primer piso y hacía observaciones incomprensibles a otras mujeres de aspecto estúpido, que se levantaban de repente como espectros, con unos gorros sucios y desatados, en los rincones y recovecos de aquel misterioso laberinto. Si a la pobre modista el sitio le había parecido tan cruel por fuera, puede afirmarse que no le resultaba una mansión de piedad mientras se abría camino a través de hileras circulares de celdas, en las que distinguía a las presas tras las mirillas enrejadas o pasaba junto a otras, que habían sacado al corredor: mujeres silenciosas, con la mirada fija, que se aplastaban contra el muro de piedra al oír el roce del vestido de *miss* Pynsent y a las que ella no se atrevía a mirar. No se había sentido nunca tan emparedada, tan asegurada por todas partes; había muros y más muros y galerías sobre galerías; hasta la luz diurna perdía allí el color y era imposible imaginar qué hora era. *Mistress* Bowerbank parecía haber fallado, y eso la hacía sentirse peor. Tenía verdadero pánico por el niño. Suponía que el horror de la escena le había sobrecogido también a él, y temía que tuviera un ataque de nervios al volver a casa. Aquél no era sitio para llevarle, fuera quien fuera quien le llamaba y aunque se estuviera muriendo. Estaba segura de que iban a aterrorizarle la quietud, el silencio penitente de aquellas mujeres aisladas o en grupos. Notaba que le apretaba la mano con más fuerza y que iba pegado a ella sin decir una palabra. Por fin, en el umbral de una puerta, ensombrecido por su gran humanidad, apareció *mistress* Bowerbank, y la modista tomó como un signo más de su poder e importancia el hecho de que no se disculpase por no haber aparecido hasta entonces ni se molestara en explicar a sus asombrados peregrinos el motivo de no haber acudido a recibirlos en la entrada, como había prometido. *Miss* Pynsent no podía comprender la mentalidad de la gente que no daba excusas, aunque la admirara y envidiara vagamente, ya que ella perdía gran parte del tiempo en disculparse de ofensas que no había cometido. Pero, en realidad, *mistress* Bowerbank no era arrogante, era maciza y musculosa; por eso, en cuanto cogió por su cuenta a sus atemorizados amigos, la modista tuvo el consuelo de comprobar que aquella mujer tan dominante era incapaz de causar molestias gratuitas a una persona que había hecho que su visita a Lomax Place transcurriera de un modo tan agradable.

Había estado planeando por los alrededores de la enfermería, y fue a unas habitaciones tétricas, dedicadas a las reclusas enfermas; allí condujo a sus huéspedes. Eran unas habitaciones desnudas y con rejas, lo mismo que todas las otras, y a *miss* Pynsent la llevaron a pensar que era una bendición estar enfermo en semejante agujero porque, como la recuperación era imposible, el caso quedaba solucionado. De todas formas, esa solución había alcanzado a muy pocas de las compañeras de Florentine, pues sólo tres de las camas estaban ocupadas, ocupadas por unas mujeres pálidas, con gorros ajustados, sobre quienes la luz misma parecía caer sin piedad en aquel cuarto feo y mal ventilado.

Mistress Bowerbank, discretamente, no prestó la menor atención a Hyacinth; se limitó a decir a *miss* Pynsent, con su claridad acostumbrada:

—La encontrará muy decaída, no hubiera podido esperar otra fecha.

Los condujo a través de otra puerta a la habitación más pequeña de todas, en la que había sólo tres camas puestas en fila. Los aterrados ojos de *miss* Pynsent vacilaban mucho más que veían, pero pudieron distinguir a una mujer que estaba en la cama del centro y tenía la cara vuelta hacia la puerta. *Mistress* Bowerbank fue derecha hacia ella, le dio un golpecito profesional en la almohada e hizo una seña para invitar y animar a los visitantes, que estaban pegados el uno al otro en el umbral. Su conductora les recordó que eran muy pocos minutos los que tenían y que, por tanto, valía más no desperdiciarlos. En vista de eso, y ya que el niño seguía echándose atrás, la modista avanzó sola, mirando a la enferma con todo el valor que era capaz de mostrar. Nueve años presa habían transformado de tal modo a Florentine que tenía la impresión de acercarse a una persona absolutamente extraña. Comprendió que había sido un acierto no decirle a Hyacinth que era guapa (lo había sido), pues no quedaba rastro de belleza en aquella máscara exangüe y hundida que no hacía el menor movimiento. Le había dicho que la pobre mujer era buena pero

no lo parecía, ni debió parecérselo al niño, que había retirado la vista de aquel último trozo que se resistía a cruzar, aunque sin decidirse a escapar tampoco, ante la llamada de sus ojos extraños y fijos, única parte de su persona que conservaba una apariencia de vida. Amanda Pynsent la encontraba rara y terriblemente vieja; una criatura que no hablaba ni se movía, trastornada e idiota, mientras que Florentine Vivier había sido para ella la idea que tenía del brillo personal, no del social. La encontraba sobre todo desfigurada y fea, cruelmente desfavorecida por el gorro y el pelo tan áspero y corto. Mientras permanecía a su lado, pensaba con cierto alivio que era imposible que Hyacinth adivinara que una persona en la que no había resto alguno de elegancia o ingenio pudiera ser su madre, cosa que haría cambiar mucho el asunto. Todo lo más que podía ocurrírsele era que fuera su abuela, como había dicho *mistress* Bowerbank, que permanecía sentada sobre la última cama, con las manos cruzadas, como un guardián del tiempo monumental, y que, llevada por su sentido del deber, comentó que la pobre enferma iba a sacar muy poco provecho si el niño no mostraba un poco más de confianza. La observación no alcanzó desde luego al niño, que estaba absorto contemplando a la reclusa. Habían colocado una silla junto a su almohada, y *miss* Pynsent se sentó, sin que la enferma pareciera darse cuenta. Hubo luego un momento en que levantó un poco la mano y la puso sobre la colcha, y la modista colocó con suavidad la suya sobre ella. Eso no provocó respuesta alguna; pero, poco después, y sin dejar de mirar al niño, Florentine murmuró unas palabras que ninguno de los presentes estaba en condiciones de entender:

—*Dieu de Dieu, quil est donc beau!*

—Desde que está tan mal no habla nada más que en francés; no hay quien le saque una palabra normal —comentó *mistress* Bowerbank.

—Resultaba muy agradable cuando hablaba aquel inglés extraño… y divertido además —aventuró *miss* Pynsent en un débil intento de animar la escena—. Supongo que se le ha olvidado todo.

—Puede muy bien haberlo olvidado, nunca le dio mucho trabajo a la lengua. Costaba pocos esfuerzos no dejarla charlar —añadió *mistress* Bowerbank, dando un tirón a la colcha de la enferma.

Miss Pynsent la arregló también un poco del otro lado, sin dejar de pensar al mismo tiempo que aquella separación de idiomas era una auténtica bendición porque, ¿cómo iba a infundirle a su compañero que él era el vástago de una persona que no podía ni decirle buenos días? Al mismo tiempo, comprendía que la escena hubiera resultado menos penosa de haber podido comunicarse con quien era objeto de su compasión. Tal como iba la cosa, parecía que se habían reunido sólo para mirarse, y eso producía un malestar espantoso, dada la delicada situación de Florentine. No era que mirase mucho a su antigua camarada, parecía que se daba cuenta de la presencia de *miss* Pynsent, y hasta que le gustaría agradecérsela, que se alegraba de comprobar por su parte los cambios que aquellos horribles años habían producido en ella, pero comprendía que no podía desperdiciar las pocas fuerzas que le quedaban en ninguna otra cosa que no fuera tener al niño. Trataba de cogerle con la súplica helada de sus ojos, olvidándose completamente de quien la había sustituido: estaba claro que había de dar su gratitud por sabida. Hyacinth, por su parte, después de algunos momentos de embarazoso silencio —la respiración de *mistress* Bowerbank era lo único que podía oírse— se daba ya por satisfecho, y se puso a buscar un sitio donde esperar con paciencia que *miss* Pynsent terminara su negocio, que hasta entonces daba tan poco de sí. No parecía querer salir del cuarto, eso hubiera sido confesar que estaba impresionadísimo, sino adoptar una actitud que dejara bien claro su total desacuerdo con tan desagradable situación. No se encontraba a gusto, y no encontró mejor manera de demostrarlo que sentarse en un taburete, en un rincón de la puerta por donde habían entrado.

—*Est-il possible, mon Dieu, qu'il soit gentil comme ça?* —gimió su madre en un susurro.

—Nos alegramos mucho de que se haya preocupado… de que la cuiden tan bien —dijo *miss* Pynsent confusa y sin saber muy bien lo que decía.

Le parecía que la frialdad de Hyacinth era excesiva y su escepticismo demasiado notorio, al mismo tiempo que sentía que las alusiones a la forma en que cuidaban a la pobre mujer no eran precisamente felices. No importaba mucho tampoco, pues era evidente que no oía nada ni mostró el menor interés cuando *mistress* Bowerbank, queriendo animar la entrevista o mostrar que sabía tratar a los niños, se dirigió al pequeño diciendo:

—¿Y no le gustaría al señorito decirle algo a esta desgraciada? ¿No tiene que contarle nada agradable después de haber venido de tan lejos para verla porque está mala? Es muy raro que un niño pueda andar por este sitio (como el hombrecito lo ha hecho) y habría muchos que se sentirían felices si hubieran visto lo que ha visto él.

—*Mon pauvre joujou, mon pauvre chéri* —continuó la reclusa con su cariñoso y trágico susurro.

—Lo único que quiere es ser muy bueno; siempre se sienta así en casa —intervino *miss* Pynsent,

alarmada ante la intervención de *mistress* Bowerbank y esperando que no hubiera una escena.

—Podía haberse quedado en casa entonces… y con esta pobre mujer tan encantada con él —observó *mistress* Bowerbank con cierta dureza.

Estaba convencida de que la situación amenazaba no alcanzar interés ni color, y quería dar a entender que, aunque no descuidara la disciplina, tampoco le gustaba que salieran del aprieto con tanta facilidad.

—Yo vine porque me trajo Pinnie —dijo Hyacinth desde su asiento—. Al principio creí que iba a gustarme. Pero no me gusta. No me gustan las cárceles. —Y colocó los pies en el travesaño del taburete, como si quisiera tocar la institución en el menor número de puntos posible.

La mujer desde la cama continuó con su extraño, casi inaudible lamento:

—*Il ne veut pas sapprocher, il a honte de moi*.

—Hay más de cuatro que empiezan así —rió *mistress* Bowerbank, irritada ante el desprecio del chico por uno de los mejores establecimientos de Su Majestad.

La carita de Hyacinth no denotaba confusión; no hizo más que volverla hacia la reclusa, pero *miss* Pynsent comprendió que estaba estableciéndose entre los dos un intercambio mudo y extraordinario:

—Iba siempre muy elegante; era una mujer muy guapa —observó dulce e impotente.

—*Il a honte de moi, il a honte de moi, Dieu le pardonne!* —insistió Florentine Vivier, sin desviar los ojos.

—Está preguntando algo en su lengua. Yo antes sabía algunas palabras —dijo, golpeando la cama, nerviosa.

—¿Quién es esa mujer?, ¿qué quiere? —exclamó Hyacinth con su clara vocecilla, que resonó en el lúgubre cuarto.

—Lo que quiere es que se acerque usted y que le dé un beso, caballero —puntualizó *mistress* Bowerbank, como si fuera más de lo que se merecía.

—No quiero besarla; Pinnie dice que robó un reloj —contestó el niño.

—¡Demonio de niño!, ¿cómo has podido…? —gritó Amanda toda colorada y dando un salto de la silla.

Fue quizá la agitación de Amanda, que al saltar empujó a la enferma, o el tono penetrante y expresivo en que Hyacinth pronunció su negativa, lo que hizo que Florentine se levantara inesperadamente, con los ojos dilatados y las manos extendidas, gritando:

—*Ah quelle infamie!* ¡Yo no he robado nunca un reloj, yo no he robado nunca nada, nada! *Ah par exemple!* —Y volvió a caer hacia atrás sollozando, vencida por la excitación que le había dado fuerzas un momento.

—No necesitaba usted añadirle más de lo que le corresponde por derecho —dijo *mistress* Bowerbank a la modista, con dignidad, y poniendo su manaza roja sobre la enferma para mantenerla en su sitio.

—¡Atiza!, ¿más? Pues yo creía que era bastante menos —gritó *miss* Pynsent completamente trastornada y saltando de la madre al hijo, como si quisiera lanzarse sobre el uno para vengarse y sobre la otra para pedir disculpas.

—*Il a honte de moi, il a honte de moi!* —repetía Florentine entre sollozos—. *Dieu de bonté, quelle horreur!*

Miss Pynsent cayó de rodillas al lado de la cama y, tratando de volver a coger la mano de la enferma, repetía con igual excitación (sentía que los nervios se le habían puesto de punta y estaban hechos jirones) que no se había dado cuenta de lo que le decía al niño, que no la había entendido, que Florentine tampoco la había entendido, y que lo que ella había dicho era que la habían acusado, pero que nadie se lo había creído. La francesa, por lo demás, no le hacía el menor caso y Amanda ocultaba su cara y su vergüenza en uno de los lados de la dura cama carcelaria, cuando por encima de las comunes lamentaciones se oyó el tono imparcial de *mistress* Bowerbank:

—El niño es delicado… ¡ya lo creo que lo es! Me he llevado un chasco, porque esperaba que iban a reconfortarla un poco. Encima, voy a cargármela con el médico por haberla puesto en ese estado, así que más vale que nos marchemos.

—Siento mucho haberla hecho llorar. Y tiene que perdonar a Pinnie. Le hice muchas preguntas.

Estas palabras sonaron justo al lado de la atribulada modista, que se levantó corriendo y vio que el niño había avanzado hasta ella y miraba de cerca a la misteriosa reclusa. Produjeron en ella un efecto aún más fuerte que las que había pronunciado un momento antes, pues tuvo fuerzas para levantarse un poco y extender los brazos hacia él en medio de sus sollozos. Hablaba todavía, pero era imposible entenderla, y *miss* Pynsent apenas tuvo tiempo de echar una ojeada a su cara desfigurada, las cuencas hundidas de sus ojos y el terrible corte de pelo. Amanda agarró al niño con una ansiedad casi tan grande como la de Florentine y, llevándole a la cabecera de la cama, le empujó hacia los brazos de su madre.

—¡Bésala, bésala y nos vamos a casa! —gritaba desesperada, mientras la pobre mujer le abrazaba y apretaba su cabeza contra la cara del niño.

Fue un abrazo tremendo e irresistible al que Hyacinth se sometió con paciencia. *Mistress* Bowerbank había tratado al principio de que su triste carga no se levantara queriendo sin duda abreviar la escena; luego, al ver que el niño estaba abrazado aceptó la situación y ayudó por detrás a sostenerla, con la idea de despejar la habitación en cuanto el esfuerzo hubiera terminado. Empinó a la paciente con vigoroso brazo; *miss* Pynsent se levantó y se volvió de espaldas, y hubo un momento de silencio en el que el niño se acomodó como pudo a tan extraña prueba. Los pensamientos que pasaron en aquellos momentos por su asombrada cabecita la modista no iba a conocerlos hasta otra ocasión. Antes de que se volviera otra vez hacia la cama, ya la había sacado de la habitación *mistress* Bowerbank, que volvió a reclinar a la reclusa, exhausta y con los ojos cerrados, sobre la almohada, y dio de paso un empujoncito profesional a Hyacinth para que marchara delante. *Miss* Pynsent volvió a casa en un coche de alquiler; estaba completamente agotada y, aunque pensó con horror que Hyacinth iba a tener ocasión de asaetearla a preguntas, con gran sorpresa por su parte, el niño no hizo ninguna. Fue todo el tiempo en silencio, mirando por la ventanilla, hasta que llegaron a Lomax Place.

IV

—Bueno, va a tener que adivinar mi nombre antes de que se lo diga —dijo la chica riéndose, al tiempo que se metía en el estrecho vestíbulo y se apoyaba en el papel destrozado de la pared, que representaba bloques de mármol, con los cantos biselados y vetas blancas y grises y que, al no haberse renovado en varios años, revivía para ella del pasado. Cuando *miss* Pynsent cerró la puerta viendo que la visita era tan decidida, la luz de la calle se filtraba por el cristal estrecho y polvoriento del montante, y Millicent sintió que reconocía hasta el olor mismo de la casa: la impresión de una penumbra mustia, con una escalera pequeña empinada al fondo, que seguía cubierta por la misma tira de hule, y que resultaba un poco menos oscura gracias a la ventana que había en el recodo (podía verse desde el vestíbulo), y en la que había que tener cuidado para no darse con la cabeza contra la casa de al lado. No había cambiado nada, salvo la propia *miss* Pynsent y la chica, por supuesto. Antes había notado que no habían tocado siquiera el anuncio de la ventana; allí estaba todavía el absurdo anuncio de los «gorritos de moda», como si la pobre modista tuviera alguna idea de ese tipo de adorno, del que *miss* Henning poseía un conocimiento tan completo. Veía que la artista le estaba mirando el sombrero, una maravillosa composición de flores y cintas; sus ojos habían recorrido a Millicent de arriba abajo, pero descansaban fascinados en el monumental adorno. La chica había olvidado lo pequeña que era la modista; apenas le llegaba al hombro. Había perdido el pelo y llevaba un gorro, que Millicent pensó si sería un ejemplo de lo que consideraba moda. *Miss* Pynsent la contemplaba desde abajo, como si tuviera seis pies de altura, pero no le extrañaba la admiración, sabía perfectamente que era una joven magnífica.

—¿No me hace pasar a la tienda? —preguntó—. No voy a encargar nada; sólo he venido para preguntar por su salud. ¿No le parece que este sitio es muy incómodo para hablar?

La chica siguió adelante sin esperar el permiso y viendo que la asustada modista no la había reconocido.

—El salón está a la derecha —dijo *miss* Pynsent en tono profesional y con intención de señalar las diferencias.

Hablaba como si al otro lado, donde el horizonte terminaba en la pared de la casa contigua, hubiera un laberinto de habitaciones. Entró detrás de su visita y encontró a la joven ya instalada en el sofá, el eterno sofá del ángulo derecho frente a la ventana, cubierto por un sudario estrecho y arrugado de una extraña tela amarilla, con un tono que revelaba los muchos lavados que había sufrido y coronado por una estampa de Rebeca en el pozo que hacía juego, en el lado opuesto, con un retrato de la emperatriz de Francia, sacado de una revista ilustrada y enmarcado al estilo de 1853. Millicent miraba a un lado y otro, preguntándose qué tendría que enseñar la modista, y convencida de que nunca una persona tan brillante como ella había pisado aquel lugar. Los viejos instrumentos continuaban encima de la mesa: los acericos y los estuches de agujas, el metro de color rojo, con el que Hyacinth y ella se medían de pequeños, y la misma colección de figurines, arrugados, amarillentos y con huellas de mosca. Toda la delantera del vestido de la modista estaba cuajada de agujas y alfileres, como siempre; parecía casi la piel erizada y rala de un animal enfermo; pero no se veían montones de telas crujientes esparcidos por el cuarto, no había más que la falda de un vestido viejo (el suyo quizá), que sin duda estaba reparando cuando llegó a la puerta, y había lanzado sobre la mesa para ir a abrir. *Miss* Henning no tardó en comprender que el negocio de su vieja amiga no había prosperado mucho y sintió cierto desprecio firme y gratuito por una persona que sabía tan poco de lo que podía lograrse en Londres. Millicent estaba convencida de que conocía ya perfectamente los recursos de la capital.

—Y dígame, ¿cómo está Hyacinth? Me gustaría mucho verle —dijo, mientras tendía unos pies muy abultados y se sostenía con las manos apoyadas en el sofá.

—¿Hyacinth? —repitió *miss* Pynsent, absolutamente pasmada y como si no hubiera oído hablar nunca de semejante persona. Veía que la chica estaba cruel y ofensivamente bien vestida y no podía imaginar quién

era ni con qué motivo había llegado allí.

—A lo mejor ahora le llama mister Robinson, siempre tuvo usted el afán de colocarle muy alto. Pero cuando le tenga delante voy a llamarle como siempre le he llamado. Ya verá si lo hago.

—¡Válgame Dios! Tienes que ser la terrible Henning —exclamó *miss* Pynsent, poniéndose frente a ella y estudiándola en todos sus detalles.

—Me alegro de que me haya conocido. Creí que lo haría en cuanto me viera, y yo diría que *era* terrible, pero creo que no estoy tan mal, ¿eh? —dijo con confianza la chica—. Tenía que hacer una cosa cerca de aquí y se me ocurrió visitarlos. No me gusta perder de vista a los viejos amigos.

—Nunca la habría reconocido, ha mejorado de una manera que yo nunca hubiera podido imaginar —comentó *miss* Pynsent, con una naturalidad que justificaban sus años y la idea que ella tenía de lo que significaba ser respetable.

—*Usted* sí que no ha cambiado; siempre estaba diciéndome cosas horribles.

—Pero supongo que ya no le importa, ¿verdad? —dijo la modista, que se sentó también, pero sin volver a coger la labor, pues estaba pasmada ante la grandeza de su visita.

—¡Huy! Ahora estoy estupendamente —declaró *miss* Henning, con la seguridad de quien no tiene miedo alguno de lo que pueda decir la gente.

—Era una niña muy mona, yo nunca dije lo contrario, pero no podía imaginarme que fuera a transformarse así. Es demasiado alta para mujer —comentó la modista, que vacilaba entre sus antiguos prejuicios y la realidad que tenía delante.

—Disfruto de una salud formidable —dijo la chica—; todo el mundo cree que tengo por lo menos veintidós años.

Estaba tan satisfecha de su tamaño y de su hermosura, que daba la impresión de que fuera a quitarse la chaqueta y dejarle a uno tentarle el brazo para que viera que no había trampa. Era realmente guapa, con un aire natural, descarado y radiante, una cara despejada y expresiva, gran abundancia de pelo castaño y una sonrisa satisfecha de lucir la blancura de sus dientes. Tenía el cuello bonito y fuerte, y una notable riqueza de curvas femeninas en su robusta figura. Llevaba unos guantes que no le cubrían del todo la muñeca y permitían ver, en las partes que quedaban libres entre las numerosas pulseras de plata, que tenía la piel bastante roja, detalle observado por *miss* Pynsent, que pensó que las manos no eran más delicadas que los pies. No era elegante, y la modista, que no había perdido su afición a todo lo que fuera distinguido, se permitió pensar que era vulgar, a pesar de tanta magnificencia. Pero había en ella algo increíblemente fresco, plenamente logrado y atractivo. Era londinense de pies a cabeza, evocaba el gentío de las calles y el tráfico apresurado de la gran ciudad; había sacado la salud y la fuerza de sus patios mugrientos y sus calles brumosas y había llenado con su ambición todos sus parques, plazas y rincones. Londres la había calado hasta los huesos, le debía el sonido de su voz y la forma de llevar la cabeza; lo comprendía por instinto y lo amaba con pasión; representaba toda su inmensa vulgaridad y todo lo que tenía de curioso, su astucia, su brutalidad, su buen natural y su impudicia, y podría haber figurado, en un desfile alegórico, como la glorificación de la ciudad, la ninfa del desierto de Middlesex, la flor de las parroquias apiñadas, el genio de la civilización urbana, la musa del *cockney*.

Los distingos que la modista hacía al mirarla le habrían costado menos escrúpulos de haber podido adivinar la impresión que ella misma le hacía a Millicent y hasta qué punto todo aquello le olía a pobreza y fracaso a la flamante joven. La imagen infantil que tenía de su dueña era la de una persona limpia, fina, superior, con grandes bucles pegados a las sienes, y un aire brillante —que le venía de andar siempre manipulando telas ricas, sedas por lo menos— que Millicent miraba con envidia. La mujercita que tenía delante estaba calva, pálida y llena de alfileres; sus ojos, pequeños y desconfiados, y el horrible gorrito que llevaba no podían disimular en qué había parado todo. *Miss* Henning bendijo una vez más su suerte, que no la había obligado a ganarse la vida cosiendo y cosiendo año tras año, en aquella calle que nadie era capaz de encontrar, y metida en un cuarto triste en el que nada había cambiado, cuando que no hubiera cambios era algo que exasperaba a su robusta y joven naturaleza. Pensó en la suerte que había tenido en pertenecer a una rama del comercio más movida y excitante, y observó también que, aunque ya era casi el mes de noviembre, no había fuego en la rejilla de la chimenea, que aparecía muy limpia y adornada con una composición, en parte arquitectónica y en parte botánica, hecha con el pelo de los padres de *miss* Pynsent, cubierta por un cristal, y flanqueada por dos jarroncitos con flores de tela.

Si la chica pensaba que la mirada de aquella señora mostraba desconfianza, hay que reconocer que la modista estaba en guardia ante la visita inesperada y poco agradable de alguien que le recordaba uno de los episodios menos honrosos en los anales de Lomax Place. *Miss* Pynsent estimaba a la gente en proporción al éxito que hubieran tenido al formar una familia, en el caso naturalmente de que tuvieran con qué formarla.

Entre los distintos miembros de la casa de Henning el éxito había sido escasísimo, y las trifulcas domésticas de la casa de al lado, cuyas vicisitudes podía seguir sólo con inclinar el oído hacia la pared medianera mientras estaba cosiendo, resultaban especialmente audibles gracias al ruido de cacharros rotos y a las imprecaciones de los lisiados, y habían sido durante mucho tiempo el escándalo de una vecindad humilde pero en buena armonía. Se suponía que el señor Henning ocupaba un puesto de confianza en una fábrica de cepillos, mientras su esposa, que permanecía en casa, se dedicaba a lavar y remendar la ropa de la numerosa prole, compuesta sobre todo de chicos. Pero la economía, la sobriedad y otra virtud todavía más importante no habían presidido nunca la vida familiar. La libertad y frecuencia con que la señora Henning mantenía relaciones con un hombre que pulía estufas más allá de Euston Road no eran ningún secreto, al menos para quien vivía en la puerta de al lado y tenía tal costumbre de levantar la cabeza de la labor que era un milagro que la acabase tan pronto. Los pequeños Henning, siempre sin lavar y sin nadie que les regañara, pasaban la mayor parte del tiempo en la calle, zurrándose unos a otros o corriendo a la tienda de la esquina por un penique de ginebra, y era también algo que provocaba exclamaciones la propensión que sus padres tenían a pedir cosas prestadas. No había un solo objeto de uso personal o doméstico que la señora Henning no hubiera intentado en alguna ocasión sacarle a la modista; desde un colchón, una vez que pensaba que iba a tener que estar mucho tiempo en la cama, hasta unas enaguas de franela o una tetera de estaño. Desde sus umbrales y ventanas, Lomax Place tuvo ocasión de contemplar el embargo de los enseres de tan interesante estirpe por un casero paciente, y el desahucio del grupo entero, que marchó en desbandada y sin amilanarse, entre burlas y descaros que no se ganaron las simpatías de la calle. Millicent, cuya amistad con Hyacinth Robinson siempre había inquietado a *miss* Pynsent —consideraba que Millicent era una chicuela sucia y temía que le enseñara cosas malas al huérfano inocente—, la niña que se sentaba en la puerta con su mirada burlona, su abundantísimo pelo y su belleza precoz, tenía entonces doce años. Desapareció como desaparecieron sus acompañantes; Lomax Place los vio doblar el cabo, es decir dar la vuelta a la esquina, y volvió a sus ocupaciones, convencida de que iban a naufragar en los arrecifes de fuera. Ni rastro de ellos apareció más por sus antiguos dominios, y se creyó que el pozo sin fondo de la ciudad se los había tragado a todos. *Miss* Pynsent soltó un suspiro; había pensado siempre que de ninguno de ellos iba a salir nada bueno, y de Millicent todavía menos.

Al reaparecer aquella jovencita, y con muestras de haber sobrevivido más que bien, no pudo menos de preguntarse si semejante fenómeno no representaba pura y simplemente el triunfo del vicio. Estaba alarmada, pero hubiera dado el dedal de plata por conocer la historia de la chica y, entre el susto y la curiosidad, pasó una media hora muy desagradable. Comprendía que la familiar y misteriosa criatura estaba jugando con ella, vengándose de la animadversión anterior, de haber sido humillada e insultada por una solterona curiosa que no pintaba nada a su lado. Si no era el triunfo del vicio era por lo menos el triunfo de la impertinencia, y también el de la juventud, la fuerza, y una mayor familiaridad con el arte del vestir de la que *miss* Pynsent pudiera alardear, a pesar del ridículo rótulo de su puerta. Veía, o creía ver, que Millicent quería asustarla, hacerle creer que había venido por Hyacinth, que quería atraparle y tentarle o descarriarle de alguna manera. Sentiría imputarle a la señorita Henning cualquier motivo que no fuera el deseo de divertirse, un sábado por la tarde, y dar un buen paseo que sus vigorosas piernas no tenían por qué rechazar; pero hay que confesar también que, al verse tratada como un lobo voraz dispuesto a lanzarse sobre el inmaculado corderillo, estaba riéndose en las mismas narices de *miss* Pynsent, y lo hacía con buen humor, sin darle importancia y sin soltar una palabra que pudiera aclarar las cosas. Pero si no había venido por Hyacinth, ¿por qué había venido? No era por amor a la modista y sus costumbres. Recordaba al chico y algunos de sus momentos cariñosos, y con la absoluta libertad de que gozaba —y la afición a agarrarse a cualquier pretexto para andar por las calles de Londres y mirar los escaparates— había pensado que podía dedicar una tarde a darse el gusto de revivir el pasado, de visitar otra vez los lugares de su infancia. Consideraba que su infancia había terminado con la marcha de su familia de Lomax Place. Si los ocupantes de aquel mal disimulado suburbio no habían vuelto a saber nada de lo que hubiera sucedido a sus desterrados paisanos, ella sí había conservado una impresión muy viva de aquellos terribles años intermedios. La familia, como tal familia, había rodado, y hasta el fondo mismo, y Millicent no dejaba de preguntarse a veces, en los momentos menos ufanos, qué buena estrella se había interpuesto en su caída y hasta le había permitido volver a subir la cuesta. En los momentos menos ufanos, ya digo, pues por regla general encontraba explicaciones de sobra para toda buena fortuna que le cayera encima. ¿Había algo más natural que el que una chica tan guapa y tan lista pudiera hacer milagros? Millicent sentía compasión por los jóvenes a quienes un destino miserable había concedido uno solo de esos atributos. Era de buen natural, pero no pensaba en satisfacer la curiosidad de *miss* Pynsent: le parecía que hacía bastante con estimularla.

Le dijo a la modista que tenía un puesto importante en unos grandes almacenes que había cerca de

Buckingham Palace; estaba en el departamento de chaquetas y abrigos; se ponía todos esos artículos para enseñárselos a los clientes, y ganaban tanto cuando los lucía ella que todo lo que se pusiera tenía garantizada la venta. *Miss* Pynsent podía imaginarse lo que se valoraban sus servicios. Acababa de tener una oferta espléndida de otro establecimiento, uno enorme de Oxford Street, y estaba pensando si aceptarlo.

—Tenemos que ir muy bien vestidas —comentó—, pero a mí eso no me importa, porque siempre me ha gustado estar guapa.

La modista, por su parte, muy seria tras las feas gafas que tenía que llevar desde hacía años, daba la impresión, al cabo de media hora, de no saber qué hacer con ella. A propósito de sus padres y de lo que hubiera ocurrido en el intervalo la chica daba pocas noticias, y *miss* Pynsent pudo ver que el círculo doméstico no encerraba ni sombra de santidad para ella. Contaba sólo consigo misma, y se mantenía bien firme. El que se quedara allí tanto tiempo, que pasara de media hora, demostraba que había venido por Hyacinth, ya que la pobre Amanda no le daba más información que la que juzgaba decente ni le decía nada que pudiera animarla a seguir allí. Se limitó a decir que mister Robinson (ponía cuidado en llamarle así) se había dedicado a la encuadernación, y había entrado de aprendiz en una casa en la que se hacían los mejores trabajos que podían encontrarse en Londres.

—¿Encuadernación? ¡Atiza! —exclamó *miss* Henning—. ¿Quiere decir que los preparan para las tiendas? Bueno, siempre creí que tendría algo que ver con los libros. Pero nunca pensé que se dedicara a un oficio.

—¿Un oficio? —gritó *miss* Pynsent—. Tendría que oír a mister Robinson hablar de él. Lo considera algo maravilloso, una de las bellas artes ni más ni menos.

Millicent sonrió, como si conociera muy bien la forma que tenía la gente de considerar las cosas, y dijo que era posible que fuera un trabajo limpio y agradable, pero que no podía creer que tuviera mucho que ver.

—Bueno, a lo mejor sí que hay algo más que ver que aquí —concluyó.

Había encontrado por fin algo irritante que decir, algo que fuera como echarle en cara a la modista su agresiva respetabilidad, que se reducía a pasar años y años sentada en aquel cuchitril oscuro, y sin más panorama al otro lado de la ventana que la perspectiva de Lomax Place. A Millicent le gustaba sentirse fuerte, pero no era bastante fuerte para eso.

A *miss* Pynsent le pareció cruel aquella alusión a su menguada industria; pero pensó que era natural que insultaran a uno si se dedicaba a hablar con una chica ordinaria. Juzgaba a la joven desde el punto de vista de una persona que no era ordinaria, y si había alguna diferencia entre ellas tenía razón al creer que la diferencia estaba a su favor. El «corte» de *miss* Pynsent no era realmente elegante, y tampoco podía uno fiarse mucho de ella a la hora de aplicar galones o combinar los colores, pero, desde el punto de vista moral, tenía el mejor gusto del mundo.

—No tengo tanto trabajo como antes —comentó—, si es eso lo que quiere decir. Mi vista ya no es tan buena, y mi salud también se ha resentido con los años.

No sé hasta qué punto le impresionó a Millicent la dignidad con que había hecho esa confesión la modista, pero contestó sin inmutarse que lo que *miss* Pynsent necesitaba era una ayudante joven, una chica mona y con gusto que animara el negocio y le diera a ella ideas nuevas:

—Sigue usted siempre con las mismas cosas; sólo con mirar cómo ha puesto la trencilla en ese vestido puedo verlo —dijo señalando con su primoroso paraguas, el que la modista tenía en las rodillas.

Luego continuó exasperándola, con el mismo aire de patrocinarla y de darle ánimos y consuelo en la forma más enojosa que había soportado la sensible piel de *miss* Pynsent. La pobre Amanda acabó por contemplarla como a una actriz que representara algo, una cantante o prestidigitadora, y llegó a pensar también si no sería ella misma la «chica mona» que proponía para dar lustre al empañado letrero. *Miss* Pynsent, en otros tiempos, había tenido ayudantas; tuvo durante unos meses hasta una «primera oficiala», pero algunas de aquellas damiselas habían resultado ejemplares tan preciosos que conservaba todavía sus andanzas en la memoria. Nunca, sin embargo, ni aun en los peores momentos, había confiado sus intereses a un ejemplar tan extraordinario como el que tenía delante. Por otro lado, no tardó en tranquilizarse con respecto a las intenciones de Millicent, pues veía cada vez más claro que era una persona sumamente ambiciosa y necesitaba un campo mucho más amplio que el saloncito mohoso que en aquellos momentos, y sólo Dios sabía por qué, honraba con su presencia. *Miss* Pynsent refrenaba su lengua como hacía siempre que se tocaba lo que era el dolor de su vida, la idea del declinar lento e inexorable en que había entrado, casi diez años antes, el día en que sus dudas y escrúpulos se habían resuelto en una espantosa equivocación. La convicción profunda de que había sido un error le había dolido desde aquel día, y había palpitado en ella como una enfermedad incurable. Había sembrado en la mente del niño la semilla de la vergüenza y el rencor; le había señalado su estigma, su punto exquisitamente vulnerable, y le había condenado a saber que

el sol no iba a brillar ya para él como brillaba para casi todos los demás. Cuando el chico tenía dieciséis años supo —o creyó saber— el juicio que había formado sobre ella, y vivió durante varios meses un período terrible, una prueba en la que toda su antigua prosperidad se vino abajo. Al darse cuenta de su equivocación, lloró tanto que se desgastó los ojos, y se debilitó de tal manera que parecía que no podría tocar otra aguja en su vida. Perdió todo interés por su trabajo, aquella facilidad de invención de que siempre había estado tan ufana, y su fama de tener las habitaciones más limpias que podían encontrarse en Lomax Place. Un par de comerciantes y un fontanero galés muy religioso, que durante varios años habían vivido en su casa, le retiraron su apoyo alegando que las camas no estaban ya tan bien ventiladas, leyenda que se difundió como una injuria. No volvió a saber, ni a importarle lo más mínimo, cómo se llevaban las mangas, y, en cuestión de nesgas y volantes, no entendía una palabra. Se vio aquejada de una debilidad grave, y más tarde de un estado de languidez prolongado, durante el cual Hyacinth la atendió con tal devoción que hizo que su sentimiento de culpa se volviera aún más agudo, y que llevó a mister Vetch, en cuanto pudo levantar la cabeza, a visitarla y estar con ella en las largas horas de la convalecencia. Al cabo de algún tiempo pudo restablecer hasta cierto punto el alquiler de habitaciones (la otra faceta de su actividad parecía haber quedado en marea baja para siempre); pero nada volvió a ser lo mismo, y ella sabía que era el principio del fin. Así habían ido las cosas, y así veía acercarse el final; tenía que estar muy cerca cuando una chiquilla a la que había conocido tirada en mitad de la calle venía a airearlo envuelta en sedas y lazos. Dio un pequeño suspiro de alivio al ver que Millicent se levantaba y se quedaba de pie, atusando el cilindro brillante de su paraguas.

—Acuérdese de expresarle a Hyacinth todo mi cariño —dijo la chica con una seguridad que dejaba bien claro que no era sensible a protestas tácitas—. No me importa que suponga que, si he estado aquí tanto tiempo, ha sido porque esperaba que apareciera para el té. Si quiere, puede decirle que he esperado una hora entera; no es ninguna vergüenza que quiera ver al novio de mi infancia. ¡Puede enterarse de que le llamo así!

Millicent continuó exhibiendo su sonrisa de escaparate, como pensaba *miss* Pynsent, y dando un permiso tras otro, como si fueran verdaderas indulgencias.

—Expóngale todo mi cariño y dígale que espero vaya a verme. Pero veo que no va a decirle nada. No sé de qué tiene miedo, pero es igual; de todas formas, voy a dejarle mi tarjeta.

Sacó una libretita de color brillante, y *miss* Pynsent vio con asombro que extraía de ella un trozo de cartulina impresa; le parecía realmente monstruoso que uno de aquellos miserables Henning pudiera desplegar ante ella semejante emblema de posición social. Millicent, al dejar la tarjeta sobre la mesa, se alegró del efecto que había producido, y soltó otra sonora carcajada al contemplar la cara, entre hambrienta y pasmada, de la modista:

—Pero ¿qué cree que voy a hacer con él? —preguntó—. Podría comérmelo de un bocado.

La pobre Amanda no volvió a echar otra ojeada a la cartulina que estaba sobre la mesa, aunque sí vio que en una esquina llevaba la dirección de su visita, un detalle que Millicent había preferido no mencionar. Se limitó a levantarse, retirando la labor con mano temblorosa y se dispuso a ver marchar a la señorita Henning lo más lejos posible:

—No crea que voy a escabullirme para que no se entere. Pienso decirle que ha estado aquí, y voy a decirle también lo que me ha parecido.

—Por supuesto que dirá algo que fastidie, ya me lo decía cuando era pequeña. Tenía la costumbre de hacerlo, ¿sabe?

—¡Ay!, bueno —dijo *miss* Pynsent, picada por el recuerdo de una animadversión que a juzgar por el aspecto de la chica había dado tan poco resultado—, ha cambiado mucho ahora, sobre todo cuando pienso de dónde venía.

—¿De dónde venía? —Millicent echó atrás la cabeza y abrió los ojos de par en par, entre un revuelo de plumas y cintas—. ¿Quería que me quedase en este asqueroso sitio para el resto de mis días? Usted sí que ha tenido que quedarse, así que podría hablar mejor de él.

Se puso colorada, alzó la voz y aparecía soberbia en su desprecio:

—Y haga el favor de decirme, ¿de dónde ha venido usted?, ¿de dónde ha venido *él*, el misterioso «mister Robinson» que nos tenía tan intrigados a todos en Plice? Creía que a lo mejor iba a aclarármelo, pero todavía no me lo ha dicho.

Miss Pynsent se volvió, tapándose los oídos con las manos.

—No tengo nada que decirle. ¡Salga de este cuarto, salga de mi casa! —gritó con voz temblorosa.

V

Así fue como no pudo ver ni oír que la puerta de la habitación se abría, como si la empujasen con cuidado desde el vestíbulo, y aparecía la figura de un hombre joven que llevaba en la boca una pipa corta. Había en su cara algo que hizo comprender a Millicent Henning que había oído desde el corredor el tono de las últimas palabras. Entraba como si supiera ya, a pesar de lo joven que era, que cuando las mujeres discuten los hombres no deben asomar la cabeza, y se preguntaba sin duda con quién se peleaba la modista. La chica reconoció en seguida a su antiguo compañero, y sin pensarlo ni azorarse ni mostrar diplomacia ninguna, con toda su vulgaridad y su afán de comunicarse, exclamó soltando un buen grito:

—¡Santo Dios, Hyacinth Robinson!, pero ¿eres tú *ése*?

Miss Pynsent se volvió como un relámpago, pero no dijo nada; luego, pálida y temblorosa, cogió otra vez su labor y se sentó junto a la ventana. Hyacinth, por su parte, se quedó mirando y enrojeció de pies a cabeza. Sabía quién era, pero no lo dijo. Preguntó únicamente, con una voz que a la chica le sonó distinta a la que ella conocía y con la que solía decirle que era espantosamente pesada:

—¿Era de mí de quien estaban hablando?

—¿Cuando pregunté de dónde venías? Sí, es que te habíamos oído en el vestíbulo —dijo Millicent riendo —. Supongo que vienes del trabajo.

—Antes vivía en Place, y estaba siempre queriendo besarme —comentó el chico haciendo un esfuerzo por que no se notara la sorpresa y la satisfacción que sentía—. ¿No vivía en Place, Pinnie?

Pinnie, por toda respuesta, fijó en él un par de ojos suplicantes, mientras que Millicent rompía a reír de aquella forma que la modista consideraba afectada con razón:

—¿Quieres saber lo que pareces? Pues pareces más que nada un francesito enyesado. ¿No es verdad que parece un francesito muy divertido, *miss* Pynsent? —continuó, como si estuviera en las mejores relaciones con la dueña de la casa.

Hyacinth se fijó en la afligida mujer; vio en su cara algo que conocía muy bien y que siempre le producía un placer perverso, un gusto extraño y nada caritativo. Era como si quisiera decir que se postraba, que se ponía a hacer penitencia en el polvo, y que él no tenía más que pasar por encima y escupirle. No hacía ninguna de las dos cosas, pero ella estaba ofreciéndose continuamente, y su constante humildad, su perpetua abyección, venía a ser un revulsivo para el dolor que llevaba en el corazón siempre y que le había hecho llorar muchas veces de rabia, en el cuartito que ocupaba bajo el tejado. Eso era lo que la actitud de Pinnie expresaba en aquel momento, y no podía expresar otra cosa después de haber oído a Millicent decir que parecía francés. Sí sabía que parecía francés, se lo habían dicho más veces, y pasaba buena parte del tiempo, y con mucho gusto además, sintiéndose como uno de aquellos franceses que había conocido en las obras de Carlyle y Michelet. Había aprendido el idioma con facilidad extraordinaria gracias a la ayuda de un compañero de trabajo, un refugiado de París, y un diccionario de segunda mano que había comprado por un chelín en Brompton Road durante uno de sus inquietos, melancólicos, tristes e interminables, pero siempre instructivos paseos por Londres. Creía que hablaba el francés por instinto natural y que había cogido el acento, el gesto y hasta la forma de mover las cejas y los hombros. Si llegara el momento de tener que hacerse pasar por extranjero —nadie sabía lo que podía suceder—, podría hacerlo admirablemente, sobre todo si conseguía un blusón. No había visto un blusón en su vida, pero sabía con toda exactitud la forma y el color que tenía y cómo había que llevarlo. Cuáles eran las circunstancias que podían obligarle a vestirse como una persona de condición aún más baja que la suya no lo hubiera dicho por nada del mundo, pero como estaban muy presentes en la cabeza de aquel joven tan imaginativo tendremos ocasión de alcanzar algún atisbo de ellas cuando le conozcamos mejor. En aquel momento, cuando no era cuestión de disfrazarse, se sonrojaba de nuevo al ver que era la voz de una chica guapa, que se reía en voz alta y había vuelto a salir del pasado, la que se lo recordaba otra vez. En los ojos de Pinnie había algo más que la

expresión de arrepentimiento habitual; había como una súplica muda, casi tan patética como la otra, que parecía pedirle que no detuviera a tan terrible visita mucho tiempo. Él no deseaba hacerlo, y había dejado a propósito abierta la puerta; no le gustaba hablar con las chicas ante los ojos de Pinnie, y veía que aquélla estaba en la mejor disposición para hablar. Por eso, sin contestar a la observación que había hecho sobre su aspecto, y sin saber demasiado bien qué decir, preguntó:

—¿Has vuelto a vivir en Place?

—¡No permita el cielo que lo haga en mi vida! —gritó la señorita Henning con verdadera emoción—. Tengo que vivir cerca del establecimiento donde trabajo.

—¿Y cuál es ese establecimiento? —preguntó el joven, que iba tomando confianza al tiempo que veía con más detalle lo guapa que era la chica.

No había callejeado tanto por Londres en balde, y sabía que cuando una chica tenía tal apariencia era *de rigueur* adoptar un tono chistoso, una libertad simpática:

—¿Es el Bull and Gate o el Elephant and Castle?

—¿Un café? ¡Vaya, lo que no se te ha pegado ha sido la cortesía de los franceses!

Había recobrado su buen humor, y el resentimiento que sentía por haber sido considerada una chica de bar —una fregona bien parecida que manejaba cacharros— se le pasaba al mirar cada vez con más atención el aspecto que tenía Hyacinth. Le encontraba extremadamente «raro», pero tenía para ella el atractivo de una moneda nueva, y compartía con la moneda la agradable sensación de valor. Puesto que recordaba tan bien lo que le gustaba besarle cuando eran pequeños, le hubiera gustado demostrar después que estaba preparada para repetir tan graciosa atención. Pero se acordó a tiempo de que debía ceñirse a seguir una línea rigurosamente distinguida, y se contentó con decir simplemente:

—No me importa lo que parezca un hombre con tal que sepa mucho. Eso es lo que a *mí* me gusta.

Miss Pynsent se había propuesto darse el gusto de ignorar a su hermosa invasora, pero la tentación de descubrirla ante Hyacinth, para rebajar un poco su hermosura, era demasiado fuerte y quiso hacer una observación sarcástica:

—*Miss* «'Enning» no viviría por nada del mundo en Lomax «Plice». Cree que es un sitio demasiado ordinario.

—Y es la verdad —contestó el chico—, es un rincón inmundo.

El dardo de la pobre modista dio en blando, mientras Millicent exclamaba alegremente:

—¡Vaya si tienes razón! —y dirigía al objeto de su admiración infantil una mirada que le hizo sentirse definitivamente a sus anchas.

—¿No supones que debo saber algo? —preguntó, plantándose delante de ella, con las piernas un poco separadas y moviendo la puerta de un lado para otro.

—¿Tú? Me importa un pito lo que sepas.

El chico era lo bastante listo para saber lo que quería decir con eso. Si quería decir que sólo con lo bien parecido que era ya podía pasar, su opinión resultaba comprensible, aunque muchas mujeres no hubieran estado de acuerdo. Era tan pequeño como había podido suponerse desde el principio —no había llegado a desarrollarse del todo— y no iba a serle difícil a ella comprender que no era lo que se dice fuerte. Tenía el esqueleto pequeño, el pecho estrecho y la cara pálida; toda su figura resultaba casi infantil, y Millicent observó después que tenía unas manos muy delicadas, las manos, en su opinión, de un caballero. Lo que a ella le gustaba era su cara, y algo romántico y decidido, casi teatral, que veía en toda su persona. La señorita Henning no conocía a un solo miembro de la profesión dramática, pero suponía que un actor debía resultar más o menos así en la vida privada. Las facciones de Hyacinth eran perfectas; los ojos, grandes y muy separados, tenían casi siempre una expresión burlona, casi impertinente, y el bigotillo suave y gracioso que llevaba sobre el labio superior hacía que pareciera que sonreía siempre, aunque estuviera triste. Las ondas de su abundante y hermoso pelo se le arremolinaban alrededor de la frente, que era lo bastante amplia para resultar interesante, y cuando apareció por primera vez, Millicent había observado que llevaba un sombrero redondo y echado hacia atrás, de forma que los rizos resultaran visibles. Llevaba una chaqueta vieja de terciopelo marrón, y una de esas corbatas de colores vivos que le hacían las manos de *miss* Pynsent con retazos de seda y muselina. Estaba mal vestido y sucio del trabajo, pero alguien que fuera observador podía ver que en toda su forma de vestir había algo «arreglado», que no le era indiferente su apariencia, mientras que a un pintor al que no le diera por lo heroico le habría gustado hacerle un boceto. Había en él algo exótico, pero, a pesar de todo, con su cara viva, desprovista de lozanía, pero no de dulzura, y cierto aire *cockney* que empapaba toda su persona, resultaba, aunque fuera en un grado distinto, tan hijo de las calles y el ambiente de Londres como la misma Millicent. Su aspecto era al mismo tiempo ingenuo y ligeramente depravado, divertido, capaz de divertir a los demás, y con una indefinible tristeza. Conmovía a

las mujeres, pero también le habían dicho muchas veces que las hacía morir de risa.

—Creo que debías cerrar la puerta —dijo *miss* Pynsent, queriendo indicar que debía echar a la visita.

—¿Has venido aquí para vernos? —preguntó él, sin hacer caso de la indicación, aunque la había entendido perfectamente.

Tenía ganas de que la chica se despidiera para acompañarla. Le apetecía hablar con ella sin la presencia de Pinnie, que daba muestras de querer clavarle un punzón, y por motivos que comprendía perfectamente. Había visto ya muchos ejemplos, y en otros casos en que las chicas no podían ni compararse con aquélla. Pinnie tenía verdadero terror a que le echaran mano y le llevaran a un matrimonio por debajo de su situación. ¡Su situación! Hyacinth se había preguntado muchas veces, y le había preguntado a la modista, cuál podía ser esa situación. Había pensado en ella con bastante amargura, y no comprendía qué podía haber en el mundo que estuviera más abajo todavía. No pensaba casarse nunca; estaba completamente decidido; no quería pasarle a otra persona la carga que había agobiado su espíritu, la herencia que había oscurecido su paso a la madurez. Por eso precisamente debía tener alguna compensación; si podía disfrutar en otra forma del dulce trato de las mujeres, estaba decidido a cultivarlo con toda audacia y libertad.

—Se me ocurrió que podía echarle una ojeada al viejo taller; tenía que hacer otra cosa cerca de aquí —dijo Millicent—. Pero nunca hubiera creído, aunque me lo dijeran, que iba a encontrarte en el sitio donde te dejé.

—¡Es que nos hacía usted falta para echarnos una mano! —exclamó *miss* Pynsent sin poder reprimirse.

—¡Tú eres de una elegancia despampanante! —comentó Hyacinth sin hacer caso a la modista.

—¡Cuidado con tu despampanante frescura! Soy tan buena chica como la mejor de Londres. —Y para corroborarlo, la señorita Henning añadió—: Si te ofrecieras a acompañarme una parte del camino cuando volviera a casa, te diría que no suelo andar por ahí con señores.

—Iré contigo hasta donde quieras —replicó Hyacinth con naturalidad, como si supiera qué era lo que había que hacer en tales casos.

—Bueno, ¡sólo porque te conocí de pequeño!

Salieron los dos, Hyacinth con cuidado de no mirar a Pinnie (la sentía pálida y llorosa a su espalda, metida en su oscuro rincón, pues era ya demasiado tarde para trabajar sin luz), y su compañera con un cruel saludo de despedida, haciendo sólo un gesto familiar por encima del hombro.

Había que andar mucho para ir desde Lomax Place a la parte de la ciudad en que vivía *miss* Henning, y donde, para estar cerca de los almacenes de Buckingham Palace Road, ocupaba una modesta vivienda trasera. Pero la influencia de la hora hacía que el paseo resultara muy agradable para el chico, a quien gustaban las calles a todas horas, pero especialmente en los atardeceres de otoño, y en sábado, cuando en los barrios bajos las tiendas pequeñas y los establecimientos al aire libre estaban más ocupados que nunca, y cuando sobre los carros de mano y los puestos de verduras callejeros brillaban unas grandes antorchas feas y humeantes. Hyacinth había andado por las calles desde que era un chiquillo, pero su imaginación no dejaba de sentirse estimulada ante los preparativos del domingo que hacían los trabajadores y las obreras, sus hermanos y hermanas, y se sentía a sus anchas entre el tumulto y los empujones, la contemplación de escaparates iluminados y el regateo en los puestos de pescado de los vendedores ambulantes. Le gustaba la gente que parecía haber cobrado el jornal y se disponía a gastarlo discretamente; los que daban muestras de ir a gastarlo sin ningún cuidado y de la forma más extravagante y, sobre todo, los que estaba claro que no habían cobrado nada y andaban de un lado para otro desinteresadamente, con las manos en los bolsillos vacíos, viendo cómo los demás discutían y llenaban las bolsas o contemplando los trozos veteados de *bacon*, las ruedas y triángulos de queso o las ristras apetitosas de salchichas en el escaparate más llamativo. Le gustaba ver el reflejo de las lámparas en el húmedo pavimento, sentir el olor a carbón de la bruma de Londres; mirar cómo la niebla del invierno se posaba sobre toda la ciudad, la difuminaba y la hacía parecer más grande, más llena de gente, formaba halos y radiaciones tenues y escurría en canalillos por los cristales. Aquella tarde andaba envuelto en todas esas impresiones, pero las disfrutaba en silencio, atento sobre todo a su compañera y halagado al sentirse amigo de una chica que hacía volver la cabeza a la gente. Ella, por su parte, pretendía que le molestaban las prisas y apreturas del fin de semana; decía que le gustaban las calles, pero las calles respetables; no podía soportar el olor del pescado que lo invadía allí todo, y esperaba llegar pronto a Edgware Road, que sí era calle para una señora. A Hyacinth le parecía que no tenía nada que ver con aquella niña de pelo largo que estaba siempre en Lomax Place, abrazada a una muñeca tiznada y queriendo ser amiga suya. Ya era una persona extraña, una amistad nueva, y la observaba intrigado, preguntándose qué habría podido hacer para llegar a aquella altura.

Ella no contribuía a aclarar mucho ese punto, aunque hablaba de toda suerte de cosas, entre ellas de sus costumbres, sus aspiraciones, los gustos y las manías que tenía, estas últimas tan exageradas como la risa de

una persona a quien se le hacen cosquillas.

Era terriblemente especial, muy difícil de complacer, ya podía verlo; y le aseguró que nunca aguantaba una cosa desde el mismo momento en que había dejado de gustarle. Sobre todo, era muy especial para tratar con los hombres, y dejó bien claro que cualquier chico que quisiera decirle algo debía tener un sueldo de cincuenta chelines a la semana como mínimo. Hyacinth le aseguró que todavía no los ganaba, y ella volvió a decir que hacía una excepción porque de él lo sabía todo (o por lo menos una gran parte), con lo que el chico pudo comprobar que era tan amable como guapa. Hizo tal excepción que, cuando bajaban por Edgware Road, que aún tenía la animación de los últimos momentos, sólo que en tono más noble, él propuso que entraran en un café a «tomar algo» (más tarde no podía comprender qué le había animado a hacerlo), y ella aceptó sin dudarlo, sin dudarlo siquiera al pensar en sus escasas ganancias. Aunque fueran escasas, las llevaba en el bolsillo (iban en parte destinadas a Pinnie), así que tampoco vio inconveniente. Millicent se puso como nueva de té, pan con mantequilla y mermelada de grosella, y dijo que el sitio estaba muy bien, aunque a él, después de haberse situado, empezaron a entrarle dudas de si era muy apropiado, pues veía entre otras cosas que las paredes estaban adornadas con fotografías de señoritas en corsé. Él también tenía hambre, no había tomado todavía el té, pero estaba demasiado excitado, demasiado preocupado para comer; aquella situación le inquietaba y le daba escalofríos; le parecía el comienzo de algo nuevo y extraño. No había ofrecido nunca, ni siquiera un vaso de cerveza, a una chica como Millicent —una chica que crujía y brillaba y olía a almizcle— y que si resultaba un ejemplar tan alegre como prometía iba a suponer un gran cambio para sus horas de asueto, para aquellas tardes en que tantas veces se sentía como un tablero grande y cuadrado donde nadie había puesto ni un rasgo de tiza. Que supusiera también un gran cambio para sus ahorros (había prometido a Pinnie y a mister Vetch apartar un poco todas las semanas), tampoco le preocupaba de momento; en realidad, aunque consideraba que ser pobre era algo insoportable y odioso, aún no se había parado a pensar en la manera de dejar de serlo. Sabía la edad que debía de tener Millicent, pero le parecía mayor, mucho mayor que él, porque daba la impresión de saber una barbaridad sobre Londres y sobre la vida en general, y eso contribuía a darle la sensación de que era también un joven elegante, puesto que la había invitado. Lo pensó también en relación al carácter del establecimiento que, si era lo que parecía, ella se habría dado cuenta tan pronto como él, pero eso formaría parte de la impresión que ya había recibido, que a Millicent no le importaba nada, mientras el té fuera fuerte y en el pan hubiera abundante mantequilla. Le contó lo que había pasado entre ella y *miss* Pynsent (no la llamó Pinnie, y se alegró, porque no le habría gustado) antes de que él llegara, y dijo que no se atrevería a ir allí otra vez porque su madre iba a sacarle los ojos. Luego corrigió:

—Claro que no es tu madre. ¡Qué tonta soy! Siempre se me olvida.

Hyacinth había cultivado desde hacía mucho tiempo la forma de enfrentarse a alusiones de ese género: había tenido siempre muchas ocasiones de hacerlo. Por eso miró sin pestañear a su acompañante mientras decía:

—Mi madre murió hace muchos años; estaba completamente inválida. Pero Pinnie ha sido muy buena conmigo.

—Mi madre también ha muerto —dijo Millicent en seguida para arreglarlo—. Murió casi de repente. Supongo que te acuerdas de ella en el Plice.

Luego, mientras Hyacinth sacaba del pasado la borrosa figura de la señora Henning, de quien recordaba sobre todo que solía parecerle atravesada y sucia, la chica añadió, sonriendo, pero con cierto sentimiento:

—Pero yo no he tenido una Pinnie.

—Parece que sabes cuidarte tú sola.

—Sí, me siento muy segura —dijo Millicent Henning, que preguntó después qué había sido de mister Vetch—: Nosotros solíamos decir que si *miss* Pynsent era tu mamá, él era tu papá. En casa le llamábamos el amor de *miss* Pynsent.

—Sigue siendo su amor todavía —dijo Hyacinth—. Es nuestro mejor amigo, o al menos lo parece. Él me dio el puesto que tengo ahora. Vive del violín, lo mismo que antes.

Millicent miró un poco a su acompañante y luego comentó:

—Yo hubiera creído que te buscaría un puesto en su teatro.

—¿En su teatro? No habría servido de nada. Yo no toco ningún instrumento.

—¡Calla, tonto! No quiero decir en la orquesta. Es que estarías muy guapo disfrazado.

Estaba en una actitud sumamente familiar, con los codos apoyados sobre la mesa y los hombros levantados. Él estuvo a punto de decir que no le gustaban los disfraces, que deseaba ir por la vida sin hacer más papel que el suyo; pero se contuvo a tiempo, al pensar que eso era precisamente lo que parecía no estar destinado a hacer. ¿Más papel que el suyo? Tenía que ocultarlo tanto como fuera posible; debía ir por la

vida con un disfraz, con una capa prestada; tenía que ser actor siempre y a todas horas. De repente, y sin que viniera a cuento, *miss* Henning preguntó:

—¿*Miss* Pynsent tiene algo que ver contigo? ¿Qué fue lo que le dio algún derecho sobre ti?

Hyacinth tenía una respuesta preparada para esa pregunta, y decidió contestar igual que lo había hecho otras veces:

—*Miss* Pynsent es una vieja amiga de la familia. Mi madre la quería mucho, y ella quería mucho a mi madre.

Repitió la fórmula con la calma inescrutable de siempre, aunque le hubiera gustado mucho más decirle que no tenía por qué meterse en las cosas de su madre. Pero era demasiado guapa para correr ese riesgo, y le ofrecía su linda cara desde el otro lado de la mesa, como si le dijera que su afán era estar a gusto y contenta. Había cosas en su corazón, y un tormento y una pasión oculta en su vida, que hubiera gustado confiarle a alguna mujer. Creía que quizá eso pudiera ser la cura definitiva; que por algo que él fuera dejando caer gota a gota, en un oído atento, pegado a una mejilla que se pudiera besar, podrían decirle otras palabras que mitigarían su pena para siempre. Pero ¿en qué mujer podía confiar, qué oído estaría seguro y bien pegado a una cara a un mismo tiempo? La respuesta no estaba en aquella lozana criatura que se reía en voz alta y cuyo sentimiento no podía tener la finura que él andaba buscando, ya que mostraba una curiosidad muy vulgar. Hyacinth odiaba la vulgaridad tanto como *miss* Pynsent; en ese aspecto había descubierto hacía tiempo que se parecía a ella. Él no se había puesto a hablar de la muerte de la señora Henning; se sentía incapaz de hacer averiguaciones sobre aquella señora, y no sentía ningún deseo de conocer la parentela de Millicent. Además, le ponía realmente enfermo que la gente empezara a darle vueltas al tema de sus orígenes, y a preguntar por qué Pinnie le había adoptado de pequeño. La señora Henning era repulsiva, pero su hija, por lo menos, podía hablar de ella. Para cambiar de asunto, comentó:

—Mister Vetch ha cambiado de casa. Se fue hace tres años del número 17. No podía aguantar a los otros huéspedes; había un hombre que tocaba el acordeón.

Millicent mostró un interés muy moderado por la anécdota, aunque le apetecía preguntar por qué iba a gustarles más a los otros el violín de mister Vetch. Luego comentó:

—Pues yo creo que mientras estaba allí podía haberte buscado algo mejor que un taller de encuadernación.

—No tenía por qué buscarme nada. Es un sitio muy bueno.

—Da igual, pero no es el sitio donde yo hubiera ido a buscarte —declaró la chica, dando la impresión de que no lo decía por hacerle un cumplido, sino porque le daba rabia haberse equivocado.

—¿Y adonde habrías ido a buscarme? ¿A la Cámara de los Comunes? Es una lástima que no me dijeras de antemano lo que te gustaba que fuese.

Le miró por encima de la taza, mientras bebía a pequeños sorbitos, como una verdadera señora:

—¿Sabes lo que decían en el Plice? Que tu padre era un lord.

—Muy probable. Pestes así son las que dicen en aquel maravilloso agujero —comentó el joven sin pestañear.

—Bueno —aventuró Millicent—, a lo mejor lo era.

—Para el provecho que he sacado podía haber sido primer ministro.

—¡Me hace gracia que hables como si no lo supieras! —dijo Millicent.

—Termina el té y no te preocupes de cómo hablo.

—Ya te has puesto de mal humor —replicó ella riendo—. Creía que ibas a ser empleado de banco.

—¿Los eligen por el humor que tengan?

—Ya sabes lo que quiero decir. Eras demasiado listo para seguir un oficio.

—Sí, pero no soy lo bastante listo para vivir del aire.

—¡Pues por la cantidad de té que tomas podrías hacerlo! ¿Por qué no te dedicaste a una profesión más alta?

—¿Y cómo iba a dedicarme? ¿Quién diablos me ayudaría? —preguntó Hyacinth con la voz algo alterada.

—¿No tienes parientes? —dijo Millicent al cabo de un momento.

—Pero ¿qué estás haciendo? ¿Quieres que me ponga a fanfarronear?

Cuando subía el tono, ella se echaba a reír, sin enfadarse lo más mínimo, y hasta daba la impresión de que le gustaba:

—Bien, siento que no seas más que un jornalero —dijo, mientras retiraba la taza.

—Pues eso soy —contestó Hyacinth.

Pero pidió la cuenta como si fuera un empleado de categoría. Luego, mientras esperaban, le dijo a su

compañera que no creía que supiera lo que era su trabajo y que no tenía ni idea de lo bonito que podía ser:

—Sí, preparo libros para las tiendas —añadió el chico al decir ella que lo entendía perfectamente—. Pero el de encuadernador es un arte exquisito.

—Eso me dijo *miss* Pynsent. Dijo que tenías algunas muestras en casa. Me gustaría verlas.

—No verías lo buenas que son —sonrió.

Esperaba dijese que era un desgraciado sinvergüenza, y estuvo a punto de hacerlo, pero se le transformaron las palabras en la boca y dijo casi con ternura:

—Así es como me hablabas antes en el Plice.

—No me importa nada de aquello; odio esa época.

—Si a eso vamos, yo también la odio —dijo Millicent, como si supiera ponerse a cualquier altura.

Luego volvió a su idea de que el chico no se había hecho justicia:

—Andabas siempre metiendo la nariz en alguna cosa. No hubiera creído nunca que ibas a hacer un trabajo manual.

Eso pareció irritarle y, después de pagar la cuenta y dar ostentosamente tres peniques a la joven que les había servido con un aire lánguido y un pelo rubio muy poco natural, contestó:

—Puedes estar segura de que, como pueda evitarlo, no voy a hacerlo ni una hora más.

—¿Y qué vas a hacer entonces?

—¡Huy!, lo verás algún día.

Ya en la calle, cuando habían empezado otra vez a andar, continuó:

—Hablas como si yo pudiera elegir. ¿Qué iba a hacer un pordiosero como yo, enterrado debajo de un millón de idiotas, en un mísero rincón de Londres? No tenía ayuda, ni influencia ni trato de ninguna clase con profesionales, ni manera tampoco de llegar hasta ellos. Tenía que hacer algo; no podía seguir viviendo a costa de Pinnie. Gracias a Dios ahora puedo ayudarla un poco. Tuve que coger lo que me dieron.

Hablaba como si le hubiera molestado que imaginara que había claudicado. Pero Millicent pareció indicar que se defendía muy bien, cuando dijo:

—Te expresas como un señor de los gordos.

Esa observación no obtuvo respuesta, pero el chico empezó otra vez a hablar y, como ya era de noche, su compañera le cogió del brazo para seguir andando hasta su casa. Antes de llegar a la puerta le había confesado que escribía en secreto y con la ilusión de publicarlo; soñaba llegar a ser alguien en literatura. Eso pareció impresionarla y, con la graciosa incoherencia que la caracterizaba se lanzó a decir que no le importaba nada la familia que tuviera un hombre, mientras ese hombre le gustara; creía que las familias y todas esas monsergas eran una cosa pasada. Hyacinth deseaba que dejara en paz a su familia y, cuando estaban entretenidos delante de la puerta, confesó:

—No me cabe la menor duda de que eres una chica encantadora, y me alegro mucho de haber vuelto a verte, pero tienes una falta de tacto que aterra.

—¿Falta de tacto *yo*? Tendrías que verme despachar una chaqueta vieja.

Guardó silencio un momento, plantado delante de ella con las manos en los bolsillos:

—Lo mejor es que seas tan guapa.

Millicent no se ruborizó ante el cumplido, y probablemente no llegó a entenderlo del todo, pero le miró a los ojos mientras sonreía enseñando los dientes, y volvió a su tema, más inconsecuente que nunca:

—¡Venga de una vez! ¿Quién eres?

—¿Quién soy? No soy más que un pobre «empleadillo» de la tienda.

—No creí que pudiera imaginarme nunca un tipo semejante —contestó convencida.

Luego le dijo que no podía dejarle entrar, porque se había propuesto no recibir nunca hombres, pero que no le importaba encontrarse con él en algún sitio… siempre que estuviera bien. Como vivía tan lejos de Lomax Place, tampoco le importaba que se vieran a medio camino. Y así fue como antes de separarse, y en una oscura bocacalle de Pimlico, se dieron una cita casual; en opinión del chico, la más interesante que jamás le hubieran concedido.

VI

Poco tiempo después, un día que estaba en el taller de encuadernación, su amigo Poupin no había acudido ni había mandado tampoco la explicación acostumbrada en caso de enfermedad o accidente doméstico. Había allí también dos o tres empleados cuya no aparición, que solía coincidir con el día siguiente a la paga, era preferible quedara sin explicar, ya que era sólo una muestra de debilidad moral; pero, por regla general, el establecimiento de mister Crookenden era un santuario de puntualidad y buenas costumbres. Eustache Poupin, menos que nadie, nunca acostumbraba a pedir un margen. Hyacinth sabía que no buscaba nunca favores, y ésa era una de las razones por las que tanto admiraba a aquel francés extraordinario, estoico ardiente, conspirador frío y exquisito artista, que era con mucho la persona más interesante que conocía y cuya conversación en el taller le hacía olvidar a veces el olor del cuero y la cola. ¡Su conversación! Hyacinth había disfrutado mucho de ella y, por la atención y el candor con que escuchaba, había hecho que el apasionado francés se encariñara con él. Poupin había ido a Inglaterra para evitar las represalias del gobierno de Thiers, después de los sucesos de la Comuna en 1871, y se había quedado allí a pesar de todas las amnistías y rehabilitaciones. Era un republicano al viejo estilo, de los de 1848, humanitario, idealista, partidario acérrimo de la fraternidad y la igualdad, y exasperado y sorprendido siempre al ver el poco entusiasmo que se sentía por ellas en la tierra de su exilio. Tenía derecho a la gratitud y la estimación de Hyacinth, porque había sido su *parrain*, su protector en el taller de encuadernación. Cuando mister Vetch encontró algo para el chico de *miss* Pynsent fue a través del francés, a quien había conocido casualmente, como pudo encontrarlo.

Cuando el chico tenía unos quince años, mister Vetch le había regalado los ensayos de lord Bacon, y la adquisición de aquel volumen trajo grandes consecuencias para Hyacinth. Anastasio Vetch era un hombre pobre, y el lujo de dar algo le estaba normalmente vedado, pero si lograba llegar a probarlo le gustaba que la sensación fuera pura. No había hombre que distinguiera mejor la diferencia entre lo vulgar y lo raro, o que fuera capaz de apreciar mejor un libro que se abría bien, que no tenía los márgenes mal cortados o la impresión poco clara. No habría regalado nunca a nadie un libro que no fuera así, aunque se tratara de un pobre diablillo a quien una modista de quinta fila (sabía que Pinnie era de quinta fila) había sacado del hospicio. Por eso, cuando llegó el momento de ponerle un ropaje nuevo al gran isabelino —un forro de tafilete discretamente dorado—, se fue derecho, con su pequeño volumen, un Pickering en tela, a mister Crookenden, a quien todo el que entendía algo del asunto tenía por el rey de los encuadernadores, aunque sabía también que su trabajo, muy limitado en cantidad, se hacía principalmente para un librero determinado y sólo a través de su agencia. Anastasio Vetch estaba decidido a no pagar la comisión del librero y, aunque pudiera ser espléndido (consigo mismo) a la hora de hacer un regalo, era capaz de aguantar lo que fuera por ahorrar seis peniques. Se encaminó al taller de mister Crookenden, que estaba situado en una vieja placita del Soho, y donde la proposición de tan menguado trabajo fue recibida al principio con una calma heladora. Mister Vetch, a pesar de todo, insistió, expuso con una franqueza irresistible las razones de su encargo: obtener la mejor encuadernación posible por la menor cantidad de dinero. Consiguió dar una idea tan viva y tan ejemplar de lo que él consideraba la mejor encuadernación posible, que el dueño del taller acabó por rendirse a esa simpatía desinteresada que en condiciones favorables se establece entre el artista y la persona entendida. El librito de mister Vetch se tomó como un servicio particular en honor de un señor excéntrico cuya visita había supuesto un intermedio jocoso (para los obreros que escuchaban) en la rutina del día; y cuando volvió tres semanas más tarde para ver cómo iba el trabajo, tuvo el gusto de comprobar que no sólo se habían seguido puntualmente sus instrucciones, sino que se habían mejorado. La habilidad y perfección con que se había hecho le llevó a preguntar a quién tenía que darle las gracias (le habían dicho que lo haría un solo hombre), y así fue cómo llegó a conocer al artesano más admirable del establecimiento, el incorruptible, el imaginativo, el infalible Eustache Poupin.

En respuesta a una apreciación de su trabajo que veía no era *banal*, *monsieur* Poupin dijo que tenía en casa una pequeña colección de pruebas hechas en tafilete, piel de Rusia y pergamino, ejemplares de fantasía que se había entretenido en hacer, por amor al arte, en sus horas de ocio, y que tendría mucho gusto en enseñárselos a su interlocutor, si éste le hacía el honor de acudir a su casa, en Lisson Grove. Mister Vetch tomó nota de la dirección y también, por amor al arte, se fue un domingo por la tarde a contemplar los esotéricos estudios del encuadernador. En aquella ocasión conoció a *madame* Poupin, una señora bajita y gorda, con un bigote erizado, gorrito blanco de *ouvrière*, un conocimiento del arte de su marido igual al suyo, y sólo tres palabras de inglés: «¿Usted, qué cree? ¿Usted, qué cree?», que introducía en la conversación sin dar muestras de fatiga. Descubrió también que su nueva amistad era un proscrito político y que miraba el inicuo montaje de la Iglesia y el Estado con ojos apenas más reverentes que los del propio violinista. *Monsieur* Poupin era un socialista agresivo, cosa que Anastasio Vetch no era, y un demócrata constructivo (en lugar de un mero escarnecedor de antiguallas), además de un teórico, un optimista, un colectivista, un perfeccionista y un visionario; creía que había de llegar el día en que todas las naciones de la tierra abolirían sus fronteras, ejércitos y aduanas, se darían un beso en ambas mejillas y cubrirían el globo de bulevares, que tendrían su centro en París, y en los que la familia humana se sentaría en pequeños grupos, según las afinidades de cada cual, y tomaría café (no té, *par exemple!*) mientras escuchaba la música de las esferas. Mister Vetch no imaginaba ni deseaba tampoco un Estado beatífico tan bien organizado; le gustaba su taza de té, y lo único que ansiaba era que la Constitución británica resultara en buena medida simplificada; consideraba que era un sistema excesivamente encarecido, pero, desde el punto de vista social, sus herejías iban codo a codo con las del pequeño encuadernador, y su amigo de Lisson Grove se transformó para él en el extranjero inteligente cuya conversación presta alas a nuestra cultura de pies de plomo. El celo humanitario de Poupin era tan ilimitado como escaso era su vocabulario inglés, y los nuevos amigos estaban de acuerdo lo suficiente, sin llegar a estarlo demasiado, para poder discutir, cosa que resultaba mucho mejor que una inefable armonía. El violinista volvió a Lisson Grove otras tardes de domingo y, como disfrutaba en su teatro, en su calidad de veterano y fiel servidor, de algún privilegio ocasional, tuvo ocasión de llevar un día un par de entradas de palco. *Madame* Poupin y su esposo pasaron una tarde tristísima en la comedia inglesa y no entendieron ni una palabra de lo que se decía, pero se consolaron fijando su atención en el arco que su amigo agitaba en la orquesta. Semejante contratiempo no bastó para detener el curso de una amistad en la que Amanda Pynsent llegó también a verse envuelta. *Madame* Poupin echaba de menos la sociedad femenina entre los fríos isleños, y mister Vetch propuso a su amiga de Lomax Place que fuera a visitarla. La modista, que no había conocido en toda su vida más francesa que la desgraciada Florentine (una muestra recomendable hasta que empezó a torcerse), acogió la idea con la esperanza de tomar algunas ideas de una señora cuya apariencia había de representar sin duda (como Florentine en un principio) el buen gusto de su nación; pero encontró en el encuadernador y su esposa una mezcla desconcertante de brillo y dejadez, y durante mucho tiempo se vio perseguida por el recuerdo del abominable estampado de la camisola de la señora, de sus exuberancias libres de corsé, y sus zapatillas de fieltro.

La amistad, a pesar de todo, quedó sellada tres meses más tarde, con una cena en Lisson Grove, un domingo por la noche, cena a la que mister Vetch llevó su violín, y en la que Amanda presentó a su hijo adoptivo, además de descubrir que si *madame* Poupin era incapaz de vestir a una francesa, sí sabía aderezar una oca para el día de San Miguel. La señora confesó al violinista que encontraba a *miss* Pynsent sumamente *comme il faut… dans le genre anglais*; ni Amanda ni Hyacinth habían asistido nunca a una velada tan espléndida. En el recuerdo del chico pasó a ocupar un lugar junto a la visita que años antes habían hecho al teatro de mister Vetch. Estaba absorto en los comentarios que intercambiaban el violinista y *monsieur* Poupin. *Monsieur* Poupin le enseñó sus encuadernaciones, los mejores trofeos de su arte, y Hyacinth tuvo la sensación de que en aquellos momentos estaban iniciándole en un fascinante misterio. Durante media hora anduvo manejando los libros; Anastasio Vetch le observaba sin hacer ningún comentario especial. Pero cuando, por vigésima vez, *miss* Pynsent consultó a su amigo sobre la «carrera» de Hyacinth —hablaba de ella como si tuviera dudas entre el servicio diplomático, el Ejército y la Iglesia—, el violinista respondió con rapidez:

—Hágale, si puede, lo que es el francés.

Al oír mencionar un trabajo artesano, la pobre Pinnie se ponía siempre muy solemne; pero cuando mister Vetch le preguntó si estaba preparada para mandar al chico a una de las universidades, a pagar la cuota estipulada para entrar en el despacho de un procurador o poder recomendarle a un director de banco o un príncipe del comercio, a proporcionarle siquiera una casa confortable mientras cortejaba a las musas y esperaba los laureles literarios, cuando le expuso, en fin, el caso con toda la lucidez irónica y cínica de que era capaz, ella se limitó a suspirar y a decir que todo lo que había podido ahorrar en su vida eran noventa

libras que, como él sabía muy bien, iban a costarle su amistad para siempre jamás si las sacaba del banco. El violinista le había advertido, en forma que no dejaba lugar a dudas, que si se deshacía en favor del chico del único recurso que tenía para su vejez, él se lavaba las manos en todo lo que pudiera pasarle. Su medida de lo que representaba el éxito para Hyacinth era bastante vaga, salvo en un solo punto; ahí se mostraba apasionada y ferozmente firme: estaba decidida a que por nada del mundo entrara en una tienda pequeña. Prefería verle de albañil o de vendedor ambulante, antes que dedicado a la venta por menor, atando velas o dando el cambio de un chelín a través de un mostrador. Prefería, había llegado a decir, verle de aprendiz de zapatero o de sastre.

El dueño de la papelería de una calle cercana había puesto en el escaparate un anuncio en el que pedía un chico listo para recados y Pinnie, al enterarse, había llevado a Hyacinth. El tendero era un tipo bravucón, con un parche en el ojo, que consideraba que el chico estaba muy bien pagado con tres chelines a la semana: un verdadero desprecio, en opinión de la modista, a sus raras habilidades y conocimientos. La educación del chico había sido irregular, precaria, y sólo había tenido cierta continuidad durante sus primeros años, mientras estuvo al cuidado de una señora vieja que combinaba sus funciones de sacristana en una iglesia próxima con el manejo, en el mismo Place donde vivía con una hermana enfermera, de los pocos niños que se libraban de realizar tareas más urgentes en casa, cuidar a los hermanos pequeños o ir a buscar la cerveza. Más tarde Pinnie había pagado durante un año cinco chelines a la semana en una academia del elegante barrio de Islington, en la que había un «instructor de lenguas extranjeras», verdadera plataforma para la oratoria y la promoción social, pero que presentaba el inconveniente de que casi todos los compañeros de Hyacinth eran hijos de tratantes en artículos alimenticios —pastelerías, comestibles y pescaderías— y le hacían pasar la pena negra al llevar a la escuela, para consumo exclusivo o para cambiar y chalanear con los otros, toda clase de bollos, naranjas, pastas y animales marinos, que tenía que ver devorar, sin tomar parte nunca con las manos en los bolsillos vacíos y el corazón encogido al pensar en una casa tan poco sustanciosa como la suya. *Miss* Pynsent no pretendía que el chico estuviera muy educado en el sentido técnico de la palabra, pero creía que a los quince años había leído ya casi todos los libros del mundo. En realidad, los límites de sus lecturas coincidían con los de las ocasiones que había tenido. Mister Vetch, que, a medida que el chico iba siendo mayor hablaba cada vez más con él, lo sabía, y le prestaba todos los libros que tenía o podía conseguir. Su manía era leer, mientras que la falta de todo contacto directo con una librería representaba para él un duro choque con la realidad; el choque de que más podía lamentarse. Mister Vetch creía que era inteligente, y por eso le parecía una verdadera lástima que no pudiera seguir alguna vía liberal; pero le hubiera parecido mucho más lastimoso todavía que un chico, con aquella expresión en los ojos, se viera condenado a medir cintas o cortar lonchas de queso. Él no tenía influencia que poner en juego ni relación con el mundo del capital o el mercado del trabajo. Sólo tocaba tan poderosas instituciones en un pequeño punto, un punto que, por lo demás, tenía muy presente.

Cuando Pinnie le dijo al tendero de la esquina, una vez oídos los «términos» en que estaba dispuesto a recibir chicos para recados, que, gracias a Dios, no había caído todavía tan bajo, tan bajo como para esclavizar a su querido hijo por tres chelines a la semana, mister Vetch pensó que lo único que había hecho era dar una expresión más florida a sus propios sentimientos. Claro que si Hyacinth no empezaba por llevar paquetes, no podía esperar promocionarse y, después de pasar por la actividad más fina de atarlos, llegar a contable o gerente; pero tanto el violinista como su amiga —*miss* Pynsent realmente sólo en último extremo — se resignaban a perder esa oportunidad. Mister Vetch vio en seguida que un trabajo artesano bonito era mucho mejor que una «ocupación» vulgar y, cuando su amistad con Eustache Poupin había progresado mucho, preguntó un día al ferviente francés si no encontraría manera de cobijar al mozo bajo sus alas y meterle en el taller de mister Crookenden. No había sitio mejor para ponerle en contacto con la más elegante de las artes mecánicas, y entrar en un establecimiento semejante y de la mano de un artista así era dar un gran paso en la vida. *Monsieur* Poupin lo meditó, y comunicó por la noche sus meditaciones a la compañera que era una réplica de sus pensamientos y le entendía mejor de lo que pudiera entenderse él mismo. El matrimonio no tenía hijos, y los echaba en falta; conocía además, por habérsela oído a mister Vetch, la dolorosa historia de la venida al mundo del chico. Era uno de los desheredados, uno de los expropiados, uno de los realmente interesantes; y encima podía decirse que era uno de los suyos, un hijo de la inagotable Francia, un retoño de la raza sagrada. Aunque no sea uno de los puntos comprobados en esta veraz historia, hay razones poderosas para creer que aquella noche, en Lisson Grove, se derramaron muchas lágrimas sobre el pobre Hyacinth Robinson. Uno o dos días más tarde, *madame* Poupin dijo al violinista que llevaba varios años en el empleo de *le vieux* Crook; que durante todo ese tiempo le había hecho un trabajo que le hubiera costado *bien du mal* encontrar quien se lo hiciera, y que nunca había pedido una disculpa, un permiso, un favor o un aumento de sueldo. Era hora de que pidiera algo aunque sólo fuera por dignidad, y

en favor de su pequeño amigo pensaba hacerlo. «*La société lui doit bien cela*», comentó cuando, después de haberse mostrado mister Crookenden más bien poco hospitalario, y una vez arregladas formalmente las cosas, mister Vetch le dio las gracias, sin afectación, bondadosa y tímidamente, a la manera inglesa. Se sintió paternal cuando Hyacinth empezó a ocupar un puesto en el maloliente taller del Soho; le protegió y le hizo su discípulo, el heredero de una gloriosa tradición, al mismo tiempo que descubría en él una inclinación hacia la verdad en la filosofía, el universo y el trabajo. Le enseñó el francés y el socialismo, le animó a pasar las tardes en Lisson Grove, le invitó a mirar a *madame* Poupin como a una segunda, o más bien tercera madre, y, en resumen, causó una profunda impresión en la mente del chico. Alentó y ayudó a manifestarse al galicismo latente en su naturaleza y, al cumplir los veinte años Hyacinth, que había asimilado completamente su influencia, le miraba con una mezcla de veneración y benévola ironía. *Monsieur* Poupin era la persona que le consolaba cuando se sentía desgraciado, y se sentía desgraciado con mucha frecuencia.

Era tan raro que faltara al trabajo, que Hyacinth, por la tarde y antes de volver a casa, fue a Lisson Grove para ver qué le ocurría. Encontró a su amigo en la cama con una cataplasma en el pecho, y a *madame* Poupin haciendo una *tisane* en la cocina. El francés tomaba su indisposición con solemnidad, pero resignadamente, como un hombre convencido de que toda enfermedad era debida a una organización imperfecta de la sociedad y estaba en la cama, tapado hasta los ojos y con un pañuelo rojo anudado en la cabeza. Sentado junto a la cama había otro visitante, un joven a quien Hyacinth no conocía. Hyacinth no había ido nunca a París, naturalmente, pero siempre suponía que el *interieur* de Lisson Grove daba una idea bastante aproximada de lo que era esa ciudad. Las dos habitaciones pequeñas que constituían su casa tenían gran número de espejos y de pequeños retratos (grabados antiguos) de héroes revolucionarios. La chimenea del dormitorio estaba cubierta por una tela roja que a Hyacinth le parecía algo extraordinario; el adorno principal del salón era un grupo de copas pequeñas y muy decoradas, puestas sobre una bandeja, y acompañadas de una serie de botellas y vasitos dorados, y todavía más pequeños, destinados a tomar café puro y licores. No había alfombras en el suelo, sino felpudos y esterillas de varias formas y tamaños a los pies de las sillas y el sofá; y en el cuarto de estar, junto a un maravilloso reloj imperio, coronado por una composición que representaba a la Virtud recibiendo una corona de laurel de manos de la Fe, *madame* Poupin, con ayuda de una pequeña estufa, un puñado de carbón vegetal y dos o tres sartenes, se las arreglaba para sacar adelante una gran *cuisine*. De las ventanas colgaban cortinillas de muselina blanca, muy encañonadas y pomposas, atadas con lazos rojos.

VII

—Estoy sufriendo muchísimo, pero todos hemos de sufrir mientras la cuestión social se vea tan mal, tan inicuamente descuidada —dijo Poupin, hablando en francés y volviendo hacia Hyacinth sus ojos saltones, unos ojos que siempre tenían la misma expresión declamatoria, reclamatoria, proclamatoria, fuera lo que fuera lo que estaba haciendo.

Hyacinth se había sentado a la cabecera de su amigo, frente al joven desconocido que ocupaba una silla al pie de la cama.

—¡Ay, sí!, con su cochina política, lo último de que se acuerdan es de la situación del *pauvre monde* —exclamó su mujer desde la cocina—. A veces me pregunto lo que va a durar esto.

—Va a durar hasta que su imbecilidad y su infamia colmen la medida. Va a durar hasta el día de la justicia, hasta que la reintegración de los desposeídos y desheredados estalle con tal fuerza que haga temblar al globo.

—Pero siempre vemos que las cosas siguen igual, nunca vemos que cambien —dijo *madame* Poupin, haciendo un ruido muy reconfortante en la sartén con una gran cuchara que tenía.

—Puede que nosotros no lo veamos, pero *ellos* lo verán —replicó su marido—. Pero ¿qué digo, hijos míos? Yo lo veo —prosiguió—. Lo tengo ante mis ojos en toda su radiante realidad, y más que nunca cuando estoy aquí tendido, sí la reivindicación, la rehabilitación, la rectificación.

Hyacinth dejó de prestar atención, no porque pensara de otro modo sobre lo que *monsieur* Poupin llamaba el *avènement* de los desheredados, sino al contrario, porque estaba muy familiarizado con ese asunto. Era el tema invariable de sus amigos franceses que vivían, según había observado hacía tiempo, en estado de inflamación espiritual crónica. Para ellos, los desheredados y la cuestión social estaban siempre presentes, y la cuestión política era siempre abominable. Se asombraba de su celo, su firmeza y su ánimo incorruptible así como de las reservas inagotables de convicciones y profecías que tenían siempre a mano. Creía que en el fondo estaba más dolido que ellos, pero tenía desviaciones y períodos de calma, momentos en que la cuestión social le aburría y en los que se olvidaba no sólo de sus propios males, cosa que hubiera sido disculpable, sino del pueblo en general, de sus hermanos y hermanas en la miseria. Ellos, por el contrario, estaban siempre en la brecha, perpetuamente de acuerdo consigo mismos y, lo que era aún más difícil, con los otros. Hyacinth había oído decir que en Francia la institución matrimonial no estaba muy considerada, pero le asombraba ver hasta qué punto era íntima la unión en Lisson Grove, idéntica la comunidad de intereses; sobre todo desde el día en que *monsieur* Poupin, en un momento de expansión, aunque muy discretamente, le había dicho que la señora sólo era su mujer en un sentido espiritual y afectivo. Existían concesiones hipócritas y supersticiones degradantes que aquella exaltada pareja no podía admitir. Hyacinth se sabía de memoria todo su vocabulario, y hubiera podido decir en cualquier ocasión y con las mismas palabras lo que iba a decir *monsieur* Poupin. Sabía que, en su fraseología, «ellos» era una alusión a cualquiera que no fuera el pueblo, aunque lo que abarcaba el pueblo no quedara tan claramente definido. Él, por supuesto, pertenecía a ese sagrado cuerpo para el que el futuro guardaba tantas compensaciones; y también pertenecían a él sus amigos franceses, Pinnie, casi todos los habitantes de Lomax Place, y los obreros del taller de Crook. Pero ¿qué era el propio Crook que llevaba un mandil casi más sucio que el de los demás y resultaba un maestro en «despachar» y tenía en cambio un hotelito en Putney y una mujer que aspiraba en secreto a tener un paje de librea? Y sobre todo, ¿qué era mister Vetch, que ganaba un salario semanal, y nada grande, con su violín, pero tenía por otra parte misteriosas afinidades de otro género, reminiscencias de un tiempo en el que fumaba puros, tenía sombrerera y andaba en coche, además de ir a Boulogne? Anastasio Vetch se había mezclado en su vida, y de un modo atroz, con ocasión de una crisis terrible; pero Hyacinth, que se esforzaba en cultivar la justicia en su propia conducta, creía que había obrado en conciencia y trataba de estimarle, tanto más al ver que el violinista, que sin duda

se sentía en falta con él, le había tratado siempre con gran benevolencia. Creía que mister Vetch sentía por él un interés sincero y que, si volvía a inmiscuirse alguna vez en su vida, lo haría de forma muy distinta: notaba que le miraba algunas veces con el mayor afecto. Había, por tanto, una gran diferencia en que perteneciera al pueblo o no, ya que en el gran día del desquite sólo el pueblo había de salvarse. El mundo estaba hecho para el pueblo: quien no estaba con el pueblo estaba contra él; y todos los demás eran opresores, usurpadores, explotadores, *accapareurs*, como decía *monsieur* Poupin. Hyacinth se lo había preguntado una vez directamente a mister Vetch, que se le quedó mirando un rato, entre la eterna humareda de su pipa, y dijo por fin:

—¿Crees que soy un aristócrata?

—Sólo sabía que era usted un burgués —contestó el chico.

—Pues no, no soy ni una cosa ni otra. Soy un bohemio.

—¿Y con traje de etiqueta todas las noches?

—Hijo mío —dijo el violinista—, ésos son los bohemios confirmados.

Hyacinth sólo quedó satisfecho a medias, pues no estaba nada claro que los bohemios también hubieran de salvarse; si lo supiera seguro, a lo mejor él también se hacía bohemio. Pero a pesar de todo no llegó nunca a sospechar que mister Vetch fuera agente del gobierno, aunque le había dicho *monsieur* Poupin que había muchísimos que tenían el mismo aspecto; claro que no lo hacía con ánimo de acusar al violinista en quien había confiado desde el principio y seguía confiando. El agente del gobierno, en los más variados disfraces, el fabuloso *mouchard* de *monsieur* Poupin, se transformó en un tipo familiar para Hyacinth y, aunque nunca había podido pescar a un miembro de los de tan infame cofradía con las manos en la masa, vistas las cosas, había muchas personas a las que no dudaría en considerar como tales. En todo caso, los Poupin no tenían nada de bohemios, y Hyacinth los conocía desde hacía bastante tiempo como para no sorprenderse de la forma en que combinaban su pasión socialista y una impaciencia al rojo vivo por la rectificación general con una vida de extraordinaria decencia y un culto por la obra bien hecha. El francés hablaba de la estafa que se le había hecho al pueblo como de algo tan indecente que no podía aguantarse ni un momento más, pero mostraba la más exquisita paciencia para estampar la cubierta de un libro, y lo cogía en sus manos como si estuviera convencido de que todo era inmutable. Hyacinth sabía lo que pensaba de los curas y las teologías, pero profesaba la religión de la artesanía hecha a conciencia, y tenía al chico realmente asombrado ante las maravillas que hacían sus dedos.

—¿Qué quieres que te diga? *J'ai la main parisienne* —confesaba modestamente *monsieur* Poupin ante la admiración de Hyacinth.

Y después de haber visto varias muestras de lo que el chico era capaz de hacer, tuvo la amabilidad de informarle de que disfrutaba también de la misma conformación:

—No hay razón para que tú no puedas ser también un buen obrero, *il n'y a que ça*.

Su propia vida estaba prácticamente gobernada por esa convicción. Disfrutaba con el empleo de sus manos, sus herramientas, y su buen gusto, que era infalible, y a Hyacinth no le costaba trabajo comprender lo que estaría sufriendo al tener que pasar un día en la cama. Sin embargo, acabó por darse cuenta de que en aquella ocasión le consolaba bastante la presencia del chico que estaba sentado a los pies de la cama, y con el que *monsieur* Poupin mostraba tal intimidad que nuestro héroe se preguntaba cómo no le había visto antes ni había oído nunca hablar de él.

—¿Y qué entiende usted por la fuerza que hará temblar el globo? —preguntó el joven, recostándose en la silla, con las manos cruzadas detrás de la cabeza.

Monsieur Poupin había hablado en francés, cosa que prefería siempre, ya que la lengua de la isla suponía una tribulación para él, pero el visitante hablaba inglés, y Hyacinth vio en seguida que no tenía nada de francés, que era imposible que *monsieur* Poupin le dijera que tenía *la main parisienne*.

—Quiero decir una fuerza que hará a los burgueses bajar a la bodega y esconderse, pálidos de miedo, detrás de sus barriles de vino y sus montones de oro —exclamó *monsieur* Poupin, moviendo unos ojos terribles.

—Y espero que en este país los haga bajar a la carbonera. *La, la!*, pero los encontraremos aunque se metan allí —comentó su mujer.

—El 89 fue una fuerza irresistible —dijo *monsieur* Poupin—. Creo que habría pensado lo mismo si hubiese estado allí.

—Y también lo fue la entrada de los versalleses, que le mandó a usted para acá hace diez años —contestó el joven.

Vio que Hyacinth estaba mirándole, y le miró él también a los ojos, sonriendo un poco, lo que hizo aumentar el interés de nuestro héroe.

—¡*Pardon, pardon*, yo resisto! —gritó Eustache Poupin, asomando entre las sábanas, bajo su improvisado gorro de noche.

Madame repitió que ellos resistían, ¡vaya si resistían!, y el joven rompió a reír, lo que hizo declarar a Poupin, con una dignidad que ni siquiera su posición yacente lograba abatir, que era una frivolidad por su parte hacer semejantes preguntas, sabiendo, como sabía… todo lo que sabía.

—Sí, ya lo sé, ya lo sé —admitió el joven con naturalidad, bajando los brazos y metiendo las manos en los bolsillos, mientras estiraba un poco las piernas—. Pero todo hay que intentarlo todavía.

—¡Oh!, pero será un intento en gran escala, *soyez tranquille*. Va a ser uno de esos experimentos que valen por una prueba completa.

Hyacinth se preguntaba de qué estarían hablando, y veía que tenía que ser algo importante, porque el desconocido no era hombre que se interesara por cualquier cosa. Estaba muy intrigado con él, le parecía un tipo notable, y se sentía algo agraviado por no conocerle: es decir, le molestaba que siendo un habitual de Lisson Grove, *monsieur* Poupin no se hubiera dignado presentarlo a su amigo de Lomax Place. Yo no sé hasta qué punto el visitante que ocupaba la otra silla se daba cuenta de lo que pensaba Hyacinth; pero, al cabo de un momento, le miró y preguntó, amistosamente pero con cierta desconfianza que no dejó de agradarle:

—¿Y usted también lo sabe?

—¿Si sé qué? —exclamó Hyacinth asombrado.

—¡Ah, nada! Si supiera, lo sabría —contestó el chico echándose a reír otra vez.

Semejante salida por parte de cualquier otra persona hubiera irritado a nuestro sensible héroe, pero sólo le hizo sentir mayor curiosidad por su interlocutor, que tenía una risa fuerte y extraordinariamente alegre.

—*Mon ami* —intervino *madame* Poupin—, debías presentar a *ces messieurs*.

—*Ah ça!*, ¿se puede bromear así con los secretos de Estado? —exclamó su marido sin hacer caso. Luego añadió en otro tono de voz—: *monsieur* Hyacinthe es un chico muy bien dotado *un enfant tres doué*, por quien siento un interés profundo. Él también tiene que saldar una cuenta, ¡y menuda cuenta!, ¿verdad, *mon petit*?

Lo había dicho con muy buena intención, pero Hyacinth se puso colorado y, sin saber muy bien lo que decía, murmuró:

—Yo lo único que quiero es que me dejen en paz.

—Es muy joven —dijo Eustache Poupin.

—De todas las personas que hemos conocido en este país, es el que más nos gusta —añadió su mujer.

—A lo mejor es francés —sugirió el joven desconocido.

A Hyacinth le parecía que los tres estaban esperando una respuesta; había como una calma expectante, y resultaba un paso dificultoso, en parte por la atención algo incitante y embarazosa del otro chico, y en parte porque era una cuestión sobre la que todavía no se había decidido. En realidad, no sabía si era inglés o francés ni cuál de las dos cosas prefería ser. La sangre de su madre, sus sufrimientos en una tierra extraña, y la espantosa desgracia que había acabado con ella, en un lugar y entre unas gentes a las que tenía que detestar, le hacían sentirse francés; pero se daba cuenta de que había también otras cosas que no tenían nada que ver con eso. Desde hacía mucho tiempo había ido tejiendo una leyenda en torno a su madre, la había levantado pieza a pieza, entre apasionadas meditaciones, con las mejillas ardiendo y los ojos llenos de lágrimas; pero había momentos en que flaqueaba y se desvanecía, días en que ya no le servía de consuelo ni contaba con ella. También había tenido un padre, un padre que había sufrido igualmente, había muerto de una puñalada, había pagado con la vida; y también le sentía en su espíritu, cuando el esfuerzo que hacía por imaginársele no acababa en pura oscuridad y confusión y le producía un desconcierto que le helaba de terror. En todo caso, se sentía bien enraizado en el lugar en que sus padres habían sufrido, y no sabía nada de ningún otro. Además, lo de que el viejo Poupin le llamara «*monsieur* Hyacinthe», como hacía muchas veces, no acababa de gustarle; le parecía que de esa manera su nombre, que en inglés le gustaba, sonaba en francés como el de un peluquero. Llevaba sobre sí una nube y un estigma, pero no estaba dispuesto a resultar ridículo:

—Yo creo que no soy nada —dijo por fin.

—*En v'là des bêtises!* —exclamó *madame* Poupin—. ¿Va a decirnos ahora que no vale tanto como cualquier otro? ¡Me gustaría verlo!

—Todos tenemos una cuenta que saldar, ¿no es verdad? —dijo el joven desconocido.

Quería sin duda animar a Hyacinth, porque había visto las ganas que tenía de evitar las alusiones de *monsieur* Poupin; pero nuestro héroe comprendía que era también uno de los que estaban dispuestos a cobrar primero. Provocaría la quiebra de la sociedad, pero cobraría. Era alto y bien parecido, pero no se

podía afirmar —Hyacinth al menos no podía hacerlo— si era guapo o feo, con su cabeza grande y su frente cuadrada, el pelo espeso y lacio, la boca gruesa y una nariz bastante ordinaria; tenía una mirada admirablemente clara y segura, y los ojos muy hundidos y, a pesar de faltarle finura en algunos rasgos de la cara, tenía en ella una expresión inteligente y resuelta, como si su alma respirara por ella y diera indicios de una buena salud moral. Estaba vestido como un obrero en domingo, y era evidente que se había puesto lo mejor que tenía para acudir a Lisson Grove, donde había una señora, y llevaba sobre todo una corbata, barata y pretenciosa al mismo tiempo, que Hyacinth, que se fijaba mucho en esas cosas, encontraba que tenía un azul horrible. Calzaba unos zapatos muy grandes, casi zapatos de campesino, y hablaba con un acento provinciano que a Hyacinth le pareció de Lancashire. Todo eso no indicaba inteligencia, pero tampoco impidió que Hyacinth comprendiera que no tenía nada de idiota, que hasta era probable que disfrutara de un buen entendimiento, lo mismo que algunas personas tienen buenos puños. Nuestro héroe ansiaba conocer personas superiores, y se sentía interesado por aquel desconocido tranquilo, cuya importancia estaba bien equilibrada y aparecía, como la de un metal precioso, en las piezas pequeñas y en las grandes. Tenía la piel de un gañán y la mirada de un comandante jefe, y podía pasar por un distinguido *savant* joven disfrazado de artesano. El disfraz debía de ser muy completo, porque tenía varias manchas oscuras en los dedos. La curiosidad de Hyacinth se vio en aquella ocasión gratificada, porque después de dos o tres alusiones ininteligibles a un determinado lugar en el que Poupin y su amigo se habían encontrado y esperaban volver a encontrarse, *madame* Poupin dijo que era una vergüenza no admitir a *monsieur* Hyacinthe que, ella respondía, era de la raza de los puros.

—A su debido tiempo, a su debido tiempo, *ma bonne* —dijo el enfermo—. *Monsieur* Hyacinthe sabe que cuento con él, lo mismo si le transformo hoy en *interne* que si espero un poco más de tiempo.

—¿Qué quiere decir con eso de *interne*? —preguntó Hyacinth.

—*Mon Dieu!*, ¿qué quiere que le diga? —Eustache Poupin le miró solemne desde su almohada—. Es usted muy simpático, pero temo que demasiado joven.

—Nunca es uno demasiado joven para contribuir con su *obole* —dijo *madame* Poupin.

—¿Puede guardar un secreto? —preguntó el otro joven, pero más bien como poniéndolo en duda.

—¿Es un complot, una conspiración? —exclamó Hyacinth.

—Lo pregunta como si preguntara si es un budín de ciruela —dijo *monsieur* Poupin—. No es una cosa de comer y no lo hacemos para divertirnos. Es un asunto muy serio, hijo mío.

—Es un grupo de obreros al que nosotros y otros muchos pertenecemos. No importa nada decirle eso —comentó el joven.

—Le aconsejo que no se lo diga a *mademoiselle*; sus ideas son de las viejas —sugirió *madame* Poupin a Hyacinth, mientras probaba su *tisane*.

Hyacinth estaba allí perdido y asombrado, mirando unas veces a su compañero de trabajo en el Soho y otras al amigo nuevo de enfrente.

—Si tienen algún plan, algo a lo que uno pueda entregarse, creo que debían habérmelo dicho —dijo dirigiéndose a *monsieur* Poupin.

El francés le contempló un poco, como si se tratara de un objeto agradable, y dijo luego al joven desconocido:

—Está celoso de usted; pero no hay ningún mal en ello: es cosa de la edad. Otro día le contaremos su historia, y comprenderá que tiene que ser por fuerza uno de los nuestros. Ha sido una casualidad que no le haya encontrado aquí antes.

—¿Cómo iban a poder encontrarse esos *messieurs* si *monsieur* Paul no viene nunca? ¡Desde luego no nos mima! —exclamó *madame* Poupin.

—Bueno, ya sabe que tengo que cuidar a mi hermana cuando no estoy en el trabajo —explicó *monsieur* Paul—. Esta tarde ha habido suerte porque una señora a la que conocemos ha venido a estar con ella.

—¿Una señora, una *lady* de verdad?

—Sí, de pies a cabeza.

—¿Y les gusta que se metan así en su casa sólo porque tienen el *désagrément* de ser pobres? Parece que es la costumbre de esta tierra, pero a mí no me va nada —prosiguió *madame* Poupin—. Me gustaría ver a una de esas *dames*, de las de verdad, venir aquí a estar conmigo.

—Pero ¡usted no es una inválida, puede valerse de las piernas!

—¡Sí, y de los brazos también! —dijo la francesa.

—Esta señora atiende a varias personas que viven en el patio nuestro, y va a leerle a mi hermana.

—¡Ah, muy bien! Ustedes los ingleses tienen mucha paciencia.

—No haríamos nunca nada si no la tuviéramos —dijo *monsieur* Paul sin perder su buen humor.

—Tienen mucha razón; eso no puede decirse muchas veces. Va a ser una tarea tremenda y sólo los fuertes podrán vencer —murmuró el francés algo cansado, volviendo los ojos a *madame* Poupin, que se acercaba despacio, con una taza llena hasta arriba de *tisane*, y probándola una y otra vez mientras andaba.

Hyacinth había estado mirando a su compañero de visita cada vez con más interés; y *monsieur* Paul pareció darse cuenta pues comentó con un gesto en dirección a la cama:

—Asegura que debíamos conocernos. Yo, desde luego, no tengo nada en contra. Me gusta conocer a la gente siempre que merezca la pena.

Hyacinth estaba tan contento que no sabía cómo tomarlo; llegó a pensar por un momento que no iba a acertar, pero dijo por fin con bastante ansiedad:

—¿Me contará todo lo del complot?

—¡Huy, si no es complot! Me parece que no les tengo mucha afición.

Y realmente, *monsieur* Paul, con sus ojos ingleses, claros, tranquilos y dulces, no tenía demasiado aire de conspirador.

—¿Es una nueva era? —preguntó Hyacinth, más bien desilusionado.

—Bueno, no sé, no es más que tomar una postura sobre uno o dos puntos.

—¡*Ah, bien, voilà du propre*, entre todos hemos conseguido que le suba la fiebre! —gritó *madame* Poupin, que había dejado la taza encima de una mesa y se inclinaba sobre su marido para tocarle la frente. El enfermo estaba sofocado y con los ojos cerrados, y era evidente que la conversación había sido demasiado para él. *Madame* Poupin dijo que si los jóvenes querían trabar amistad era mejor que lo hicieran fuera, porque el enfermo debía estar tranquilo. Ellos se disculparon y prometieron volver al día siguiente para saber cómo estaba y, dos minutos más tarde, Hyacinth se encontró cara a cara con su compañero, delante de la casa de los Poupin, y bajo la luz de un farol que trataba inútilmente de disipar la oscuridad invernal.

—¿Su nombre es *monsieur* Paul? —preguntó Hyacinth mirándole.

—¡Huy, no, por Dios! Ésa es la manera afrancesada que tienen ellos de decirlo. Mi nombre sí es Paul, pero Paul Muniment.

—¿Y en qué trabajas? —preguntó Hyacinth con repentina familiaridad al ver que su amigo le había dicho ya mucho más de lo que solía decirse en tales casos.

Paul Muniment le miró desde su altura y sus anchos hombros:

—Trabajo en una firma de productos farmacéuticos, en Lambeth.

—¿Y dónde vives?

—Vivo también al otro lado del río, en el extremo sur de Londres.

—¿Y vas a casa ahora?

—Sí, voy a dar una vuelta.

—¿Puedo yo darme la vuelta contigo?

Mister Muniment volvió a contemplarle y se echó a reír:

—Puedo llevarte a cuestas si quieres.

—Gracias; espero que podré andar tanto como tú —dijo Hyacinth.

—Muy bien, admiro el espíritu que tienes y me atrevo a decir que va a gustarme tu compañía.

Había algo en su cara que, unido a la idea de que andaba metido en adoptar una postura —nuestro ardiente amigo veía una hilera de bayonetas de punta—, hizo a Hyacinth sentir deseos de ir con él hasta que no pudiera con su alma; y al cabo de un momento echaron a andar juntos en la dirección que había dicho Muniment. Iban hablando mientras andaban, e intercambiaron muchas opiniones y comentarios, pero llegaron a la parte sudoeste de Londres, donde el joven vivía con su hermana enferma, antes de que le hubiera dicho a Hyacinth nada definitivo sobre los «puntos» a que había aludido anteriormente y sin que Hyacinth, a su vez, hubiera explicado las circunstancias que le convertían, según *monsieur* Poupin, en uno de los desheredados. Hyacinth no quería apremiarle, ni por nada del mundo parecer indiscreto y, aunque le había cogido mucha simpatía a Muniment, no estaba tampoco preparado para que le apremiase él. Por lo tanto, no llegó a quedar bien claro cómo había entablado amistad con Poupin ni cuánto tiempo había disfrutado de ella. Sin embargo, Paul Muniment se mostró más bien comunicativo, sobre todo a la hora de explicar que vivía en un rinconcito muy pobre. Tenía que cuidar a su hermana, que no podía valerse por sí misma, y pagar un alquiler muy bajo, porque necesitaba médicos, medicinas y toda clase de pequeñas atenciones. Gastaba un chelín a la semana en flores para ella. Le dijo también que la casa, una vez arriba, resultaba mejor, y que desde las ventanas de atrás se veía la cúpula de la catedral de San Pablo. Audley Court, a pesar de ese nombre tan bonito que a Hyacinth le recordaba a Tennyson, resultó un rincón más cochambroso aún que Lomax Place; y tenía además el inconveniente de que había que entrar por una calleja estrecha, una especie de pasadizo entre altos muros negros. Se pararon ante la puerta de una de las

casas y, después de entretenerse un poco, Muniment dijo:

—Oye, ¿por qué no subes? Me caes lo bastante bien para hacerlo, y podrías conocer a mi hermana. Se llama Rosy.

Hablaba como si se tratara de un privilegio, y comentó luego en broma que a Rosy lo que más le gustaba era que la visitara un caballero. Hyacinth no necesitaba que le animaran, así que emprendió la subida a tientas, detrás de su compañero, y por una escalera oscura en la que no pararon hasta llegar arriba, y que le pareció la más larga y empinada que había subido en su vida. Paul Muniment abrió una puerta y, al ver desde el umbral que la habitación estaba a oscuras, preguntó:

—¿Qué pasa? ¿Te has ido a la cama?

—¡No! —respondió una vocecilla clara—, estamos sentadas a oscuras. *Lady* Aurora es tan amable que sigue aquí.

La voz salía de un rincón tan tenebroso que no se veía a la que hablaba.

—¡Ah, muy bien! —contestó Paul Muniment—. Pues vas a tener una reunión entonces, porque yo traigo a alguien más. Somos pobres, sabes, pero honrados, y no tenemos miedo de que nos vean, y creo, además, que podríamos encender una vela.

En aquel momento, a la débil luz del fuego, Hyacinth vio que se levantaba una figura, una figura alta, angulosa y delgada, que llevaba un sombrero grande y vago y un velo flotante sobre la cara. La desconocida soltó una risa muy especial y dijo:

—He traído algunas velas; podríamos haber tenido luz si hubiéramos querido tenerla.

El tono y el sentido de las palabras anunciaron a Hyacinth que era *lady* Aurora quien las había pronunciado.

VIII

Paul Muniment sacó del bolsillo una cerilla, la encendió en la suela del zapato y la aplicó luego a una vela de sebo que había encima de la chimenea, en un cacharro de hojalata. Eso permitió a Hyacinth distinguir en un rincón una cama estrecha, y un pequeño bulto tendido en ella, bulto en el que veía sobre todo un par de ojos brillantes, con unas pupilas muy oscuras que contrastaban vivamente, y que le miraban por encima de una colcha de colores. La habitación estaba atestada de los más heterogéneos objetos, pero daba la impresión de estar muy decorada gracias a los muchos grabados pequeños, en negro y color, que cubrían las paredes. La chica del rincón parecía que se había acostado en un museo y, cuando Hyacinth se dio cuenta, acabó de confirmar que Paul Muniment y su hermana eran unos seres maravillosos. *Lady* Aurora planeaba ante él de un modo extraño, erecta, pero tambaleante y a punto de caer al mismo tiempo, y se reía mucho, insegura y tímida, como si pensara que era muy raro que todavía estuviera allí.

—Rosy —dijo el guía de Hyacinth—, te he traído una visita. Este chico ha venido a pie desde Lisson Grove para conocerte.

Rosy seguía mirándole por encima de la colcha, y Hyacinth se sentía algo cohibido, porque nunca le habían presentado a una chica en esa posición.

—No tienes que preocuparte de que esté en la cama —dijo su hermano—, está siempre en la cama. Pero está en la cama lo mismo que una trucha resbaladiza en el agua.

—¡Pobre de mí si no recibiera visitas porque estoy en la cama!, no serviría de mucho. ¿Verdad, *lady* Aurora?

Rosy había hecho esa pregunta en un tono alegre y ligero, clavando los ojos en su compañera, que contestó con mayor hilaridad todavía y con una voz que a Hyacinth le pareció muy extraña y afectada:

—¡Huy, no, por Dios! Es el sitio más indicado. Y además es una cama deliciosa, una cama muy cómoda.

—Sí que lo es cuando su señoría la hace —contestó Rosy.

Hyacinth, entretanto, se sentía asombrado ante el extraño fenómeno de que una hija de un par del reino (porque estaba convencido de que tenía que serlo) realizara las funciones de una doncella.

—Pero ¿no habrá estado haciéndola otra vez? —dijo Muniment, golpeando el colchón de la enferma con su vigorosa mano.

—¿Y quién iba a hacerla si yo no la hago? —preguntó *lady* Aurora—. No supone más de un minuto si se sabe hacer.

Su manera de actuar era una especie de apología jocosa, y daba la impresión de declararse culpable por haber hecho una cosa absurda. Hyacinth creyó ver en la penumbra que se sonrojaba, como si estuviera muy azorada. Pero, a pesar del sonrojo, recordaba a un personaje de comedia. Pronunciaba la *r* como si fuese una *w*.

—Sé hacerla muy bien. La hago muchas veces cuando no sube *mistress* Major —dijo Paul Muniment, que seguía golpeando la cama de su hermana, para probarla, pero con fuerza excesiva.

—¡Ah, no tengo la menor duda! *Mistress* Major debe de tener mucho que hacer.

—Pero me temo que no deben de ser camas; no tienen más que dos o tres para tanta gente —contestó el joven en voz alta, y con una alegría más bien inconsecuente.

—Sí, lo he pensado muchas veces. Pero tampoco habría sitio para poner más, me parece —dijo *lady* Aurora, esta vez muy seria.

—Para una familia como ésa no hay mucho sitio en ninguna parte. Trece personas de todas las edades y tamaños —comentó el joven—. El mundo es bastante grande, pero parece que no hay sitio.

—En casa también somos trece —se apresuró a decir *lady* Aurora—. También estamos más bien apretados.

—¿No querrá decir en Inglefield? —preguntó Rosy desde su oscuro rincón.

—Yo no sé nada de Inglefield. Estoy casi siempre en Londres.

Hyacinth veía que Inglefield era un asunto del que no quería hablar. Por eso añadió:

—En casa también somos de todas las edades y de todos los tamaños.

—¡Vaya! Pues es una suerte que no sean todos de su tamaño —declaró Paul Muniment, con una tranquilidad que extrañó a Hyacinth y le hizo pensar que, aunque su amigo era un chico encantador, tenía muy poco tacto.

Luego lo justificó pensando que había nacido en el campo y no había tenido, como él, la ventaja de vivir en la ciudad; y un poco más tarde se preguntó por qué un tipo así había de tener tacto y finura y si no podía hacer mucho mejor el papel que le correspondía en el mundo con el simple ejercicio de su fuerza ruda y masculina.

Ante esa familiar alusión a su estatura, *lady* Aurora iba de un lado para otro, un poquito confusa; Hyacinth tuvo la impresión de que su alta y delgada figura casi se balanceaba por el cuarto. La conmoción la llevó hacia la puerta y, entre una serie de exclamaciones muy difíciles de entender, estaba ya a punto de marcharse cuando Rosy, más hábil que su hermano en el trato social, la detuvo diciendo:

—¿No te das cuenta de que su señoría parece tan alta porque está de pie, majadero? Nosotros no somos trece y tenemos todos los muebles que queramos, y hay una silla para cada uno. Haga el favor de sentarse otra vez, *lady* Aurora, y ayúdeme a atender a este caballero. No sé su nombre, señor; a lo mejor mi hermano lo dice cuando recobre el juicio. Me alegro mucho de verle, aunque la verdad es que no le veo muy bien. ¿Por qué no encendemos una de las velas de la señora? Son mucho mejores que ésas.

Hyacinth encontraba encantadora a *miss* Muniment; empezaba a verla mejor, y contemplaba su carita, pálida y afilada, enmarcada en la almohada por abundante pelo negro. Era una persona diminuta, consumida por una larga enfermedad. Le parecía una persona muy bien dotada, pero encontraba imposible calcular su edad. *Lady* Aurora insistió en que tenía que haberse marchado hacía tiempo, pero se sentó en la silla que le había acercado Paul.

—¡Anda, qué cosas! —exclamó—. Me dijiste tu nombre, pero se me ha olvidado completamente.

Luego, cuando Hyacinth había vuelto a decirlo, Paul se dirigió a su hermana:

—Eso no va a decirte mucho; hay montones de Robinson en el norte. Pero te gustará porque está muy bien. Le encontré en casa de los Puppin.

Le llamaba «Puppin» al encuadernador francés, y ése era el nombre que oía siempre Hyacinth en el taller de Crookenden. Hyacinth sabía que su pronunciación se parecía mucho más al nombre verdadero.

—Su nombre, igual que el mío, es el nombre de una flor —dijo la mujercita de la cama—. El mío es Rose Muniment y el de su señoría Aurora Langrish. Quiere decir el amanecer o la mañana; es el más bonito, ¿no le parece?

Rose Muniment dirigió esa pregunta a Hyacinth, mientras *lady* Aurora la miraba en silencio y con timidez, como si admirase su educación, el dominio que tenía sobre sí misma y su manera de hablar. Su hermano encendió una de las velas que había traído la señora, y la chica añadió, sin esperar la respuesta de Hyacinth:

—¿No le parece bien que se llame Aurora si lleva la luz adonde vaya? Los Puppins son esos extranjeros tan encantadores de que he hablado a usted.

—¡Ay, sí, es tan agradable conocer a algunos extranjeros! —exclamó *lady* Aurora, casi presa de un espasmo—. ¡Resultan muchas veces tan espontáneos!

—Mister Robinson es una especie de extranjero, y es muy espontáneo —dijo Paul Muniment—. Cuando está con mister Puppin, se encuentra como en su casa. No me vendría a mí mal tener su don de lenguas.

—Me gustaría mucho ayudarte a aprender francés. Comprendo que es una ventaja saberlo —dijo Hyacinth amablemente y, como se dio cuenta de que atraía hacia él la atención de *lady* Aurora, empezó a pensar qué podría decir luego para mantenerse a la misma altura.

Era la primera vez que se encontraba junto a un miembro de esa aristocracia a la que, según las teorías ya conocidas de *miss* Pynsent, él pertenecía también; y el momento resultaba muy interesante, aunque la apariencia de la señora no llevara muchas señales de las cualidades que distinguían a su casta. Tenía unos treinta años de edad; la nariz grande, y la cara delgada y larga, a pesar de que su barbilla daba la impresión de escaparse hacia atrás. Debía de ser muy corta de vista; tenía los dientes superiores muy salientes, y enseñaba las encías al reírse; llevaba el pelo, que era bonito, peinado en sedosas madejas (Rose Muniment creía que maravillosas) que le caían sobre las mejillas. Parecía que durante mucho tiempo hubiera dejado su ropa a la intemperie, bajo la lluvia, y el descuido general de su atuendo se completaba con el agujero de uno de sus guantes negros, por el que se veía un dedo muy blanco. Se mostraba sencilla y poco segura, y podría haber sido pobre; pero en su fina fibra general, en la delgadez como sesgada de toda su persona, en

la delicadeza de sus curiosas facciones, y en cierta calidad cultivada que había en su expresión, dulce, indefinida y cortés, se veía algo que sugería casta, que decía que aquél era un organismo que tenía que haberse hecho a través de una larga transmisión y de una serie de toques afortunados. No era una mujer vulgar, era uno de los caprichos de una aristocracia. Hyacinth no la definió así en su fuero interno, pero pensó que, aunque ella fuera una criatura sencilla (cosa que luego demostró no ser), la aristocracia era una cosa muy complicada.

Lady Aurora comentó que había libros franceses maravillosos, y él dijo que era también un tormento saberlo cuando no podían conseguirse. Eso llevó a *lady* Aurora a decir, después de un momento de duda, que tenía gran cantidad de ellos y que se los prestaría con mucho gusto si lo deseaba. Hyacinth dio las gracias, las dio incluso demasiado, al ver la amabilidad de la oferta y las perspectivas que abría (conocía la desesperación de tener los volúmenes en la mano para manejarlos por fuera, pero sin poder llevarlos a casa por la noche, pues cuando había probado subrepticiamente el sistema en sus primeras semanas en el taller de Crook habían estado a punto de echarle), y se preguntaba al mismo tiempo cómo podría ponerse en práctica el ofrecimiento, si le dijera que fuese a su casa y esperase en el vestíbulo hasta que le dieran los libros. Rose Muniment dijo que así era siempre su señoría, siempre queriendo hacer algo por los otros, porque eran menos afortunados que ella: sería capaz de quitarse los zapatos si se le antojaban a alguno. La señora declaró que iba a dejar de ir a verla si la chica seguía alabándola de esa manera; pero Rosy, sin hacer ningún caso, le explicó a Hyacinth que creía que lo menos que podía hacer era dar lo que tenía. Estaba tan avergonzada de ser rica, que no comprendía cómo las clases bajas no habían entrado todavía en Inglefield y habían cogido todos los tesoros del cuarto italiano. Era una socialista temible, peor que ninguno, peor que Paul mismo.

—Me gustaría saber si es peor que yo —se aventuró a decir Hyacinth, que no había entendido las alusiones a Inglefield y el cuarto italiano, de los que la señorita Muniment hablaba como si los conociera perfectamente.

Más adelante, al tener un mayor conocimiento del mundo, recordaba el tono de la hermana de Muniment —iba a tener muchas ocasiones de observarlo— como el de una persona que tuviera costumbre de visitar a la nobleza en sus casas de campo; hablaba de Inglefield como si hubiera estado allí.

—¡Caramba!, no sabía que fueras tan avanzado —exclamó el dueño de la casa, que había permanecido callado, sentado de medio lado en una silla demasiado estrecha para él, con el brazo agarrado al respaldo —. A lo mejor hemos estado hablando con un ángel sin darnos cuenta.

Hyacinth comprendió que estaba tomándole el pelo, pero que lo mejor en ese caso era exagerar sus opiniones:

—¿No sabías que era avanzado? Pues yo creo que eso es lo más importante que tengo. Creo que puedo llegar hasta donde llegue cualquiera.

—Creía que lo más importante que tenías era que sabías francés —dijo Paul Muniment en tono de broma, y Hyacinth comprendió que no trataría de ridiculizarle, si no le tuviera simpatía, al tiempo que veía que era él mismo quien había estado a punto de ponerse en ridículo.

—Pues si lo sé es por algo. Y puedo decir una cosa que te haría perder la cabeza si no estás preparado… una cosa que dicen en francés precisamente.

—¡Ay, dígalo, dígalo, nos encantaría! —dijo Rosy con la mejor buena fe y juntando las manos, excitada.

La petición resultaba embarazosa, pero Hyacinth se libró de sus consecuencias gracias a una observación de *lady* Aurora, que balbució por fin las palabras, después de dos o tres arranques frustrados, y hablándole, al dirigirse a él, con una consideración exagerada:

—Me gustaría saber, sería interesante, si no le parece mal, hasta dónde llega usted exactamente.

Echó la cabeza atrás, sacó los hombros y, si hubiera tenido una barbilla más apropiada para el caso, habría dado la impresión de que le apuntaba con ella.

Ese nuevo reto era poco menos alarmante que el otro, porque además no llevaba preparada ninguna contestación impresionante. Respondió, sin embargo, con una naturalidad en la que trataba de disimular lo mejor posible su falta de firmeza:

—Bueno, creo que estoy muy decidido. Que llego a conclusiones ante las que incluso *monsieur* y *madame* Poupin se echarían atrás. Poupin, desde luego; en cuanto a su mujer, ya no estoy tan seguro.

—Me gustaría conocer a *madame* —murmuró *lady* Aurora, como si la educación pidiese que había de contentarse con esa respuesta.

—¡Bah! Poupin no está decidido. Puedes aventajarle con toda facilidad —dijo Muniment—. Tiene un buen repertorio de frases, cosas que gusta oír realmente; pero no se le ha ocurrido una idea nueva desde hace treinta años. Es el surtido viejo que se aja de estar en el escaparate. Pero a pesar de todo, le calienta a

uno; tiene una chispa del fuego sagrado. La conclusión a que llega mister Robinson —añadió dirigiéndose a *lady* Aurora—, es que a su padre debían cortarle la cabeza y ponerla en una pica.

—¡Ah, sí!, la Revolución francesa.

—¡Por Dios! Yo no sé nada de su padre, *milady* —intervino Hyacinth.

—¿No ha oído hablar nunca del conde de Inglefield? —preguntó Rose Muniment.

—Es uno de los mejores —dijo *lady* Aurora como si abogara por él.

—Es muy probable, pero es un terrateniente, y tiene un puesto hereditario y un parque de cinco mil acres para él, mientras nosotros estamos aquí hacinados en esta especie de perrera.

Hyacinth admiraba la firmeza del joven, hasta que vio que se estaba divirtiendo; y luego admiró que pudiera mezclar la broma con las tremendas opiniones que estaba seguro de que tenía. Él asociaba en su imaginación la amargura con el entusiasmo revolucionario, pero el otro chico, más experto, hacía planes para el futuro y se divertía al mismo tiempo, poniendo en ridículo a los revolucionarios, aunque sólo fuera para entretener a las presuntas víctimas.

—Ya te he dicho muchas veces que no estoy de acuerdo en absoluto —dijo Rose Muniment, a quien el hecho de estar tumbada no parecía impedir que tomara parte—. Vais a cometer un error tremendo si tratáis de trastornarlo todo. Tiene que haber diferencias, y altos y bajos, y las habrá siempre, y es tan verdad como que estoy aquí tumbada. Yo creo que va contra todo tratar de echar abajo al que está arriba.

—Todo apunta a grandes cambios en este país, pero si Rosy está contra ellos, ¿cómo vamos a estar seguros? Es lo único que me hace dudar —añadió su hermano, mirándola con tranquilidad, que demostraba que estaba muy acostumbrado a ser indulgente.

—Bueno, yo puedo estar mala, pero no estoy enterrada, y si estoy contenta con mi posición, a pesar de ser como es, puede haber otros que estén contentos con la suya. Su señoría, si lo mira de esa manera, puede pensar que valgo tanto como ella, pero le costaría mucho trabajo hacérmelo creer a mí.

—Creo que es mucho mejor que yo, y conozco muy poca gente que sea tan buena —intervino *lady* Aurora, ruborizándose, no por sus opiniones, sino por timidez.

Se notaba que, aunque era original, hubiera querido serlo más todavía. Se dio cuenta de que una declaración así podía parecer vulgar a personas que no acababan de comprender lo que decía, y para arreglarlo añadió con toda la rapidez que le permitían sus dudas:

—Ya saben que hay algo que no deben olvidar *a propos* de revoluciones y cambios y todo ese tipo de cosas; y lo menciono únicamente porque estábamos hablando de algunos de los horrores cometidos en Francia. Si llegara a producirse un gran trastorno en este país, y espero que no se produzca, tengo la impresión de que el pueblo se comportaría de una forma muy distinta.

—¿Qué pueblo quiere usted decir? —se permitió preguntar Hyacinth.

—¡Ah, la clase alta!, la gente que lo tiene todo.

—Es que nosotros no los llamamos *pueblo* —observó Hyacinth, aunque comprendió en seguida que había dicho una tontería.

—Supongo que los llamáis los desgraciados, los canallas —comentó Rose Muniment riéndose.

—Todas las cosas sí, pero no todos los cerebros —dijo su hermano.

—Por supuesto que no. ¿No son idiotas? —exclamó su señoría—. Pero es lo mismo, no creo que se marcharan.

—¿Que se marcharan?

—Quiero decir que emigraran, como hicieron muchos nobles franceses. Se quedarían en casa y aguantarían; se dedicarían a luchar y lucharían de firme, me parece.

—Me alegro mucho de oírlo, y además estoy segura de que iban a ganar —dijo Rosy.

—No se vendrían abajo, desde luego —prosiguió *lady* Aurora—. Lucharían hasta que los derrotasen.

—¿Y cree usted que los derrotarían por fin? —preguntó Hyacinth.

—¡Ay, hijo, sí! —contestó con una familiaridad que le sorprendió muchísimo—. Pero, por supuesto espero que no suceda.

—Por lo que ha dicho, me imagino que lo hablan mucho entre ellos, para decidir la línea que van a seguir —comentó Paul Muniment.

Pero Rosy intervino antes de que *lady* Aurora pudiera contestar:

—Me parece que está muy mal hablar tanto de eso, y creo que no tenemos por qué seguir hablando. Cuando oigo decir a su señoría que la aristocracia va a oponer una buena resistencia, me alegro de oírselo decir y creo que habla como corresponde a su posición. Pero hay algo más en su tono que, si me está permitido decirlo, considero que es un gran error. Si su señoría espera, en el caso de que las clases bajas se levanten de tan odiosa manera, que se va a librar por las buenas, gracias a las concesiones que ha hecho por

adelantado, me atrevería a aconsejarle que se ahorre la desilusión y el disgusto. Si van a pisotear a los que son mejores que ellos, no será por habérnoslo dado todo por lo que le van a perdonar a *ella*. Van a pisotearla igual que a los otros, y dirán que tiene que pagar por llevar un título, y tener grandes relaciones y una hermosa apariencia. Por tanto, le aconsejo que no malgaste su bondad en tratar de ponerse abajo. Cuando se está tan alto hay que mantenerse allí; y si los poderes de arriba le han hecho a usted una *lady*, lo mejor que puede hacer es llevar la cabeza bien alta. Puedo asegurar que yo lo haría.

La lógica clara del discurso, y la extraña seguridad con que la pobre oradora lo había soltado desde la cama, dejaron a Hyacinth pasmado, y le confirmaron en la idea de que el hermano y la hermana formaban una pareja extraordinaria. Los efectos sobre *lady* Aurora fueron terribles, pues era evidente que no esperaba recibir semejante reprimenda, y menos en un sitio como aquél. Intentó buscar refugio en una serie de suspiros suplicantes, mientras que Paul Muniment, con su humor deliberado y agudo, y sin ver o sin querer tener en cuenta que había sido suficiente con el rapapolvo de su hermana, le infligió una nueva humillación al decir:

—Tiene razón Rosy, *milady*. No sirve de nada que intente compensarlo. Nunca podrá hacer bastante; su sacrificio no cuenta. Deja de pasarlo bien ahora, y no se lo agradecerán más tarde. A la gente como usted nunca se le descontará nada. Cómase el budín mientras lo tiene a mano, pues no podrá hacerlo mucho tiempo.

Lady Aurora le escuchó sin apartar los ojos de su cara, y Hyacinth no sabía realmente cómo interpretar su expresión. Luego creyó encontrarle un significado. Se levantó de prisa en cuanto Muniment terminó de hablar; el movimiento parecía indicar que se sentía ofendida, y le hubiera gustado demostrarle que creía que habían estado groseros con ella. Pero no le dio ocasión de hacerlo, porque ni le miró siquiera. Luego vio que se había equivocado y que, si se había puesto muy colorada, era sólo por la excitación y el placer que le había producido escuchar una charla tan original y ver por fin en sus amigos la familiaridad que siempre había deseado que tuvieran:

—Sois la gente más maravillosa; me gustaría que todo el mundo os conociese —exclamó—. Pero tengo que marcharme ya. Fue hacia la cama, se inclinó sobre Rosy y le dio un beso.

—Paul la acompañará hasta donde usted quiera —dijo la joven.

Lady Aurora protestó, pero Paul, sin decir nada por su parte, cogió el sombrero y la miró sonriente, como si conociera cuál era su deber.

En vista de eso, su señoría dijo:

—Puedes acompañarme por la escalera; se me había olvidado que estaba tan oscura.

—Tienes que coger la vela de su señoría y buscar un coche —ordenó Rosy.

—No cojo coche, voy a pie.

—Bueno, puede ir en la baca de un ómnibus, si le parece; de todas formas, seguirá siendo soberbia —declaró *miss* Muniment, mirándola con simpatía.

—¿Soberbia? ¡Pobre de mí! —dijo la grotesca y abnegada señora saliendo de la casa con Paul, que pidió a Hyacinth que le esperase un momento.

Se había olvidado de despedirse de nuestro joven, que se preguntaba qué podía esperarse de esa clase de gente cuando, hasta los mejores, los que deseaban resultar agradables al *demos*, acababan siendo altaneros. No había vuelto a hablar de prestarle libros.

IX

—Vive en Belgrave Square; tiene muchos hermanos y hermanas. Una de sus hermanas está casada con lord Warmington —dijo Rose Muniment inmediatamente.

No parecía preocuparse lo más mínimo por haberse quedado con un chico desconocido y en una habitación que volvía a estar medio a oscuras al haberse llevado Paul la segunda y mejor de las velas. Tenía tanto interés en contarle a Hyacinth la historia de *lady* Aurora, que no parecía darse cuenta de que apenas sabía nada de su acompañante. Su señoría había dedicado su vida y su dinero a los pobres y los enfermos; no le importaban nada las fiestas, las carreras, los bailes, las cartas, las comidas en el campo o la vida en las grandes casas, diversiones habituales de la aristocracia: era lo mismo que una santa de las antiguas, que hubiera salido de una leyenda. Había conocido, a Paul y a ella, hacía poco más o menos un año, a través de una amiga, una chica muy buena que estaba en el hospital de Saint Thomas a causa de una operación. Había estado allí varias semanas, y *lady* Aurora, que siempre se preocupaba de los que no podían valerse, iba a estar con ella y a leerle cosas, y cuando terminó de hallarse en el hospital y tuvo que despedirse de su amiga, la chica le dijo que conocía a otra persona muy desgraciada (que no la admitían allí porque era incurable) y que le agradecería mucho una atención semejante. Le había dado a *lady* Aurora las señas de Audley Court, y al día siguiente su señoría había llamado a su puerta. No porque ella fuera pobre (aunque desde luego andaban bien apurados), sino por las pocas satisfacciones que podía tener a causa de su invalidez. *Lady* Aurora fue a verla durante varios meses sin encontrar a Paul, que estaba siempre trabajando, pero un día volvió a propósito más pronto para encontrarla, darle las gracias por su amabilidad y (Rosy apuntó tímidamente) para comprobar si era tan buena como su extravagante hermana decía. Rosy tuvo un verdadero triunfo: Paul se vio obligado a admitir que su señoría iba más allá de lo que cualquier persona en su sano juicio pudiera creer. Parecía querer darlo todo a los que estaban por debajo de ella, y no esperar nunca que le dieran las gracias. Y no andaba sermoneando y diciendo lo que había que hacer; hablaba en plan amistoso, como si se tratase de las propias hermanas. Y éstas eran las más encopetadas del país, y su nombre apareció en los periódicos el día en que fueron presentadas a la reina. A *lady* Aurora también la habían presentado, con plumas en la cabeza y un traje de cola; pero ella había vuelto la espalda a todo eso casi con terror, una especie de estremecimiento y depresión que había descrito varias veces a *miss* Muniment. El día en que conoció a Paul fue cuando se hicieron los tres íntimos amigos, si así podía llamarse a una relación tan especial. La mujercita, la niña que estaba allí tumbada (Hyacinth no acababa de ver si era niña o mujer) le contó al joven un secreto, que le interesó demasiado para pararse a pensar si era una confidencia precipitada. El secreto era que, de todas las personas que su señoría había conocido en el mundo, estaba convencida de que el más listo era Paul. Y había conocido a los más grandes, a los más famosos, a los más extraordinarios de cualquier clase, porque todos iban a pasar unos días en Inglefield; hasta treinta y cuarenta al mismo tiempo. Había hablado con todos ellos y les había oído decir todo lo que sabían (y podía uno imaginarse lo que tratarían de decir en un sitio como aquel, donde había invernaderos que ocupaban casi una milla entera y donde se encendían hasta cien velas de cera de una vez), y después de todo eso había llegado a la conclusión, y se lo había dicho a Rosy también, de que ninguno de ellos llevaba sobre los hombros una cabeza como la del mozo de Audley Court. Rosy no quería que ese rumor se extendiera por el patio donde vivían, pero deseaba que todos los amigos de su hermano (y podía ver que Hyacinth era amigo de verdad por la forma en que escuchaba) supieran lo que se pensaba de él entre quienes tenían experiencia de tratar con personas cultas. No quería dar a entender que su señoría se hubiese rebajado ante una persona que se ganaba el pan en una sucia tienda (por muy listo que fuera), pero estaba bien claro que hacía tanto caso de lo que decía como si lo dijera un obispo; en realidad más, porque ella no tenía una gran opinión de los obispos, igual que le pasaba a Paul, y ésa era una idea que había sacado de él. No le importaba nada que volviera del trabajo antes de que ella se hubiera ido, y Hyacinth ya había visto

cómo se había demorado aquella misma noche. Estaba segura de que su señoría le dejaría que la acompañase hasta mitad del camino. Ese anuncio hizo suponer a Hyacinth que la sesión con la comunicativa joven iba a ser larga; pero se alegraba de esperar, porque estaba extraña y vagamente excitado con su charla, y fascinado por encontrarse en aquel cuartito de arriba, que olía de un modo extraño, atesoraba las reliquias bruñidas de una casa campesina del norte, estaba decorado con adornos de un penique, y unido de una forma tan insospechada a Belgrave Square y a las grandes posesiones campestres. Pasó media hora con la extraña, lista, inválida y comunicativa hermana de Paul Muniment, que le daba la impresión de ser una persona educada y de talento natural (se expresaba mucho mejor que Pinnie o Milly Henning), y que le asombró, desconcertó y disgustó algo al mismo tiempo, por la forma en que hablaba de la clase más abyecta, la gente que se postraba y perdía la cabeza en presencia de quienes eran más que ellos. Ésa era la actitud de Pinnie, por supuesto, pero hacía tiempo que Hyacinth había comprendido que su madre adoptiva llevaba en la sangre generaciones enteras de paciencia plebeya y que, aunque era un alma de Dios, no tenía realmente un gran espíritu. De todas formas, el tono de *miss* Muniment le divertía más que afligirle, y estaba emocionado por la frecuencia y familiaridad con que aludía a una clase de vida sobre la que había querido saber algo tantas veces. Por su manera de pensar estaba perpetuamente, casi morbosamente convencido de que el círculo en que se movía no era más que un remanso pequeño y somero en el rugiente remolino de Londres, y su imaginación se zambullía una y otra vez en la corriente que se agitaba en torno y más allá de él, con la esperanza de que le arrastrara hacia un espectáculo más brillante y feliz, el espectáculo de una sociedad en la que unos hombres distinguidos y unas mujeres orgullosas y amables a un mismo tiempo se reunían en espléndidas habitaciones y, entre sonrisas y voces suaves, hablaban de arte, de literatura y de historia. Cuando Rosy se despachó a su gusto sobre el tema de *lady* Aurora se quedó algo más tranquila, sin hacerle tampoco ninguna pregunta directa a Hyacinth, como si diera la respuesta por sabida. Él dijo que tenía que dejarle volver a verla pronto y, para explicar su deseo, añadió:

—Es que me parecéis una gente muy curiosa.

La chica no intentó desmentir esa impresión:

—¡Ah, sí!, creo que resultamos muy curiosos. Eso es lo que piensa la gente; y sobre todo yo, que soy desgraciada, pero estoy tan contenta.

Y para demostrarlo se echó a reír hasta hacer crujir la cama.

—Quizá sea una suerte que estés enferma; si estuvieras bien, a lo mejor andarías de un lado para otro —comentó Hyacinth. Y añadió luego ingenuamente—: No comprendo cómo puedes estar tan bien enterada de todo.

—No veo por qué necesitas comprenderlo. Pero quizá lo comprendieras si hubieses conocido a mi padre y a mi madre.

—¿Eran muy originales también?

—Creo que lo pensarías si hubieses estado alguna vez en las minas. Las minas, sí, de donde se saca el cochino carbón. De allí venía mi padre, estuvo trabajando en el pozo desde que tenía diez años. No fue a la escuela ni una vez en su vida, pero supo salir del agujero a la luz del día y al aire, inventó una máquina y se casó con mi madre, que era de Durham y, por su gente, procedía también del pozo y del horror. Mi padre no tenía una gran figura, pero *ella* era magnífica, la mujer más guapa del país, la más valiente y la mejor. Está ya en la tumba, y no podría ir a verla aunque estuviera en el cementerio de la iglesia más próxima. Mi padre era tan negro como el carbón que sacaba; yo sé que soy copia exacta suya, si descontamos que él podía usar las piernas antes de que se las empapara de alcohol. Por lo demás, en cuanto a gran inteligencia, entre mi padre y mi madre, no había mucho donde escoger. Claro que, ¿para qué sirve el talento si no se tiene fuerza en que apoyarlo? Y mi pobre padre de eso tenía todavía menos que yo, porque yo es sólo el cuerpo lo que no puedo sostener, pero él era toda su persona. Inventó, para usarlo en los talleres, un perfeccionamiento mecánico —un sistema para sujetar las vigas, o lo que sea—, y lo vendió en Bradford por quince libras; quiero decir todos los derechos y beneficios, toda esperanza de bienestar para su familia. Se descarriaba continuamente, y mi madre andaba siempre llevándole a casa otra vez. Tenía quehacer de sobra conmigo, que era una cría enclenque desde que abrí los ojos. Una noche se descarrió tanto que no volvió más a casa; vamos, volvió hecho un amasijo sangriento de ropas. No sabía adonde iba y se había caído en una cantera. Por eso mi hermano no prueba nunca una gota ni para mojar el dedo, y yo sólo tomo un poco una vez a la semana para fortalecerme. Tomo lo que me trae su señoría, pero nada más. Si hubiese llegado antes de que muriera mi madre, habría sido una bendición. Yo tenía nueve años cuando murió mi padre, y tengo tres años más que Paul. Mi madre hizo todo lo que pudo por mantenernos decentes, si un revoltijo inútil como yo puede estar decente. En cualquier caso, consiguió que viviera, y eso demuestra que se las

arreglaba bien. Iba al lavadero, y podría haber pasado por una reina cuando estaba allí, con los brazos desnudos entre la ropa sucia y el pelo sujeto con unas trenzas. Era sumamente guapa, pero no había hombre que se atreviera a decírselo. Y gracias a ella tuvimos educación; estaba decidida a ponernos por encima de lo corriente. En su posición, cualquiera hubiera pensado que no iba a preocuparse de esas cosas, pero se pintaba sola para tenernos encima de un libro. Ella podía aferrarse a una idea, cosa que mi pobre padre no podía, y su idea era que Paul siguiera estudiando y cuidara de mí. Y ya puedes ver cuál ha sido el resultado. Cómo pudo conseguirlo no lo puedo decir, porque nunca tuvimos un penique para pagar estudios, y la cabeza de mi madre tampoco habría servido de mucho si mi hermano no hubiese tenido buena cabeza. Todo quedaba en familia. Paul era un chico que aprendía más de un cartel amarillo colgado en la pared o de la tabla de horarios de una estación que otros muchos en un año de colegio. Ésa fue su única escuela: pescar lo que podía. A mi madre se me la llevaron cuando todavía hacía falta, hace casi cinco años. Hubo una epidemia de tifus y me pasó a mí por alto, claro que no hubiera hecho gran fiesta con un estorbo así, y tumbó en cambio de espalda a aquella gran mujer. Ya no volvió a dolerle, inclinada sobre la espuma de sus lavados, por recta y ancha que la tuviera. No habiéndola visto —concluyó Rose Muniment— no te lo puedes imaginar, pero quería que comprendieras que nuestros padres tenían al menos buenas cabezas que dejarnos.

Hyacinth escuchaba aquella elocuencia —la explicación más clara de algo que había oído a una mujer— con profundo interés, y sin pensar por un momento que eran exageraciones de la hija: la impresión que tenía del hermano y la hermana era tal, que hubiera necesitado una historia más maravillosa para justificarla. Le llevaba a pensarlo la forma misma en que Rose Muniment hablaba del talento; pronunciaba esa palabra como si estuviese distribuyendo premios, desde una plataforma, a la eminencia intelectual. No había duda de que el inventor débil y la mujer fuerte habían sido buenos ejemplares, pero eso no disminuía el mérito de sus originales retoños. La insistencia de la niña en las virtudes de su madre (aunque empezaba a tener una idea más exacta de su edad seguía considerándola una niña) hacía sonar en su corazón una cuerda que siempre estaba dispuesta a vibrar, la cuerda que con tristeza e inútilmente le hacía preguntarse qué habría supuesto en su vida tener al lado una presencia tan cálida como ésa.

—¿Quieres mucho a tu hermano? —preguntó al cabo de un rato.

Los ojos de la chica brillaron:

—Si alguna vez te peleas con él, verás de qué lado me pongo.

—Sí, pero antes haré que yo te guste también.

—Es muy posible, y verás cómo te despabilo.

—Entonces, ¿por qué te opones a sus puntos de vista, a sus ideas sobre lo que debe hacer el pueblo?

—Porque creo que va a pasar por encima de ellos.

—¡Nunca, nunca! —gritó Hyacinth—. Hace sólo una o dos horas que le conozco, pero lo niego con todas mis fuerzas.

—¿Así es como vas a conseguir gustarme? ¿Contradiciéndome de esa manera? —preguntó *miss* Muniment con cariñosa picardía.

—¿Y de qué sirve que me digas que van a sacrificarme? Igual se puede morir como un cordero que como una oveja.

—Es que no creo que seas ningún cordero. No puedes serlo si quieres que echen abajo a todos los grandes y que ocurran las cosas más espantosas.

—¿No crees en la igualdad humana? ¿No quieres que se haga algo en favor de los millones de personas que gimen y se matan trabajando, los que han sido engañados, aplastados y estafados durante toda la vida?

Hyacinth hizo esa pregunta con mucho calor, pero no produjo más efecto en su compañera que hacerle soltar una carcajada:

—Lo dices igual que un hombre que me describía mi hermano hace tres días, un hombrecillo que estaba en no sé qué club, con los pelos de punta. Paul imitaba la forma en que bramaba y pataleaba. No digo que tú hagas ninguna de las dos cosas, pero empleas casi las mismas palabras que él.

Hyacinth no sabía qué hacer de semejante comparación ni del cuadro que ofrecía Paul Muniment burlándose de los que hablaban en nombre de los oprimidos. Pero Rosy empezó a hablar otra vez, antes de que pudiera pensar que era mucho lo que tenía que aprender de su hermano:

—No pongo ninguna objeción a que se mejore al pueblo, pero tampoco quiero que se rebaje a la aristocracia ni una pulgada.

—¡Tendrías que conocer a mi tía Pinnie, que es otra idólatra ciega igual que tú! —contestó Hyacinth.

—¡Estás consiguiendo gustarme! Y haz el favor de decirme: ¿quién es tu tía Pinnie?

—Es modista y una mujercita encantadora. Me gustaría que viniera a verte.

—Temo que no estoy en su línea: no me he puesto un vestido en mi vida. Pero si es una mujer

encantadora, a mí también me gustaría mucho verla —se apresuró a añadir *miss* Muniment.

—Algún día la traeré —dijo. Estaba irritado por el optimismo de la chica; le parecía una vergüenza que una persona tan lista se pusiera en el lado malo—. ¿No quieres para ti un sitio mejor para vivir?

Dio un brinco y, por un momento, creyó que iba a saltar de la cama sobre él:

—¿Un sitio mejor que éste? Pero dime, ¿puede haber un sitio mejor? Todo el mundo cree que es delicioso. Tendrías que ver la vista que tenemos de día, y tendrías que ver todo lo que tengo. A lo mejor estás acostumbrado a algo muy fino, pero *lady* Aurora dice que no hay en todo Belgrave Square una casita tan cómoda como ésta. Si crees que no estoy plenamente satisfecha estás muy equivocado.

Tal actitud sólo podía exasperarle, y la exasperación le impedía lamentar la equivocación que había cometido yendo a meter las narices en los dominios de *miss* Muniment. La misma Pinnie, con lo sumisa que era, le había evitado ese disgusto; se lamentaba bastante de la porquería de Lomax Place para no hacerle pensar que la miseria la había idiotizado del todo.

—¿No pones a tu hermano de mal humor a veces? —preguntó, sonriendo, a su interlocutora.

—¿De mal humor? ¡No sé por quién nos tomas! No le he visto perder la calma en su vida.

—¡Tiene que ser un tipo bien raro! Pero, entonces, ¿no le importa nada… lo que estamos diciendo?

Rosy guardó silencio un momento; luego contestó:

—Lo que realmente le importa a mi hermano… Mira, un día de estos, cuando lo sepas, me lo dices.

Hyacinth se quedó pasmado:

—Pero ¿no está completamente metido en… en lo que él llamaría el misterio?

—¿Metido en qué?

—Bueno, en todo lo que pasa por debajo. ¿No pertenece a algunas cosas muy importantes?

—Yo no sé a qué pertenece, pero puedes preguntárselo —dijo Rosy, echándose a reír al ver que se abría la puerta y entraba el protagonista de su conversación—. Debes de haber cruzado el río con su señoría. Me gustaría saber quién se ha divertido más con el paseo.

—Es una solterona muy manejable y tiene muy buena zancada —dijo el joven.

—Yo creo, señor Muniment, que está enamorada de ti, sencillamente.

—Hija mía, para ser admiradora de la aristocracia te permites muchas licencias —bromeó su hermano, sonriendo a Hyacinth.

Hyacinth se levantó; pensaba que la visita había durado bastante. Su curiosidad no estaba satisfecha ni mucho menos, pero creía que el tiempo que podía uno pasar en el dormitorio de una señorita tenía también su límite.

—A lo mejor sí que lo está, ¿por qué no? —dijo.

—Puede que sí, está lo bastante chiflada para hacer cualquier cosa.

—Ya ha habido antes gente fina que daba al pueblo golpecitos en la espalda y pretendía comprenderle —dijo Hyacinth—. ¿Se dedica sólo a jugar con esa idea o lo toma en serio?

—¡En serio, absolutamente en serio, muchacho! Yo creo que no tiene sitio en su casa.

—¿Que no tiene sitio en Inglefield? ¡Si caben allí trescientas personas! —exclamó Rosy.

—Pues si está en manos de semejante turba, no me extraña que prefiera Camberwell. Tenemos que ser buenos con la pobre *lady*.

Hyacinth observó el tono que había empleado Paul, y atribuyó a sus palabras un significado espécial: parecía decir que la gente como él estaba ya tan segura de lo que iba a suceder que podía permitirse ser magnánima, o expresaba tal vez previsión, ante la condena que amenazaba la cabeza de su señoría.

Muniment preguntó luego si Rosy y Hyacinth se habían entendido bien, y la chica dijo que mister Robinson había sabido hacerse muy agradable.

—Entonces, cuando se marche, tienes que contarme muchas cosas de él, porque la verdad es que sé muy poco.

—¡Ah, sí! Te lo contaré todo, ya sabes lo que me gustan las descripciones.

A Hyacinth le divirtió la forma en que la chica hablaba de sus esfuerzos por agradarle, cuando en realidad no había hecho más que escucharla casi sin abrir la boca; pero Paul, adivinando o no la verdad de lo sucedido, dijo:

—Es maravilloso, puede describir cosas que no ha visto nunca. Y además resultan iguales que la realidad.

—No hay nada que yo no haya visto —declaró Rosy—. Ésa es la ventaja de estar tumbada aquí. Veo todo lo que hay en el mundo.

—No parece que veas las reuniones de tu hermano… las sociedades secretas y los clubs revolucionarios. No quisiste hablar de ellos cuando te pregunté.

—Es que no tienes que preguntarle esas cosas —repuso Paul con ceño, aunque Hyacinth vio en seguida que lo decía en broma.

—Entonces, ¿qué tengo que hacer si tú tampoco me dices nada claro?

—Te resultará claro de sobra cuando te cuelguen —comentó Rosy en tono de burla.

—¿Por qué quieres meter la cabeza en unos agujeros tan negros y tan feos? —preguntó Muniment, con la mano en el hombro de Hyacinth y sacudiéndole un poco.

—¿No perteneces al partido de acción? —contestó Hyacinth con toda seriedad.

—¡Mira cómo ha pescado todas las estupideces del reclamo! Esa frase tan bonita tienes que haberla sacado de los periódicos, de algún cabecilla idiota. ¿Es ése el partido al que quieres pertenecer? —dijo dominando con sus claros ojos a su diminuto amigo.

—Si me dijeras de qué se trata ya no tendría que acudir a los periódicos —alegó Hyacinth con toda candidez, aunque sin lamentar mostrarse así.

Estaba convencido, y no le faltaba razón, de que era una persona que no pediría jamás un favor, pero se daba cuenta de que en sus relaciones con Paul Muniment esa ley tenía que ser abolida. Ante aquel hombre tan especial podía ponerse de rodillas sin sentirse humillado.

—Pero ¿qué quiere usted decir, engañado, infatuado joven? —prosiguió Paul, sin tomarle en serio.

—Sabes muy bien que vas a algunos sitios adonde más valdría que no fueras, y muchas veces, cuando estoy aquí tumbada y oigo pasos en la escalera, creo que vienen a registrar tus papeles —aclaró su hermana.

—El día en que encuentren mis papeles, querida, será el día que te levantes y te pongas a bailar.

—¿Por qué me dijiste entonces que viniera contigo? —preguntó Hyacinth, dando vueltas al sombrero.

Hubo un momento en que tuvo que hacer un esfuerzo para contener las lágrimas; se veía obligado a pensar que la hospitalidad de su nuevo amigo no era lo que se había imaginado. Había tenido la feliz impresión de que Muniment adivinaba en él a un posible e importante asociado en la cruzada clandestina contra el orden establecido, y resultaba que a lo que había venido era a entretener a una inválida descarada. Todo eso estaba muy bien, y él dispuesto a sentarse junto a la cama de la señorita Rosy todos los días de la semana, siempre que fuera parte de su servicio; pero en ese caso debía disfrutar, por lo menos, de la confianza de su hermano. Pero el joven justificó una vez más en aquel momento la gran opinión que *lady* Aurora Langrish tenía de su inteligencia: sin pararse a pensar qué respuesta debía dar a la pregunta de su amigo encontró otra mejor y dijo, un poco al tuntún, sonriendo y sin saber realmente qué había querido decir Hyacinth:

—¿Por qué te dije que vinieras conmigo? Para ver si tenías miedo.

De qué había que tener miedo resultaba otro misterio para Hyacinth, pero respondió en seguida:

—Creo que no tienes más que probarme para verlo.

—Estoy segura de que como le presentes a alguno de esos perversos amigos que tienes, quedará más que satisfecho con sólo echar una ojeada —comentó Rosy sin poder contenerse.

Su sinceridad pareció conmover al amigo:

—Bien, veo que eres uno de los buenos. Reúnete conmigo cualquier noche.

—¿Dónde, dónde? —preguntó Hyacinth impaciente.

—Te lo diré cuando no esté *ella* delante. —Y con el mismo buen humor, Muniment le acompañó hasta la puerta.

X

Varios meses después de que Hyacinth le conociera, se le ocurrió a Millicent Henning que era hora de que nuestro héroe la llevase a algún lugar de diversión de los de primera fila. Él propuso entonces el Canterbury Music Hall, ante lo cual ella movió la cabeza y afirmó que lo menos que podía hacer un joven cuando una señorita había hecho todo lo que ella había realizado por él, era llevarla a pasar la tarde en un teatro del Strand. Hyacinth se hubiera visto perdido para decir con exactitud qué era lo que había realizado por él, pero se había acostumbrado a verla convencida de que tenía grandes obligaciones. Desde el día en que fue a buscarle a Lomax Place había pasado a ocupar un lugar muy importante en su vida, y el asombro reflejado en la consumida cara de la pobre Pinnie había subido varios grados. Todos los pronósticos de Amanda Pynsent se habían cumplido al pie de la letra: el cometa fugaz se había transformado en estrella fija. No le había hablado de Millicent más que una vez, varias semanas después de su entrevista con la chica; y no lo había hecho en tono de reproche, pues se había despojado para siempre de toda prerrogativa materna. La indagación llorosa, trémula y deferente era ya su única arma, y no podía haber nada más humilde o circunspecto que el uso que hacía de ella. No pasaba en casa ni una sola tarde y tenía una misteriosa manera de pasar los domingos, en lo que no entraba para nada la visita a la iglesia. En otros tiempos, después del té, se sentaba muchas veces con la modista junto a la lámpara y, mientras sus dedos volaban, le iba leyendo obras de Dickens y Scott; horas felices en las que parecía haber olvidado el daño que le había hecho y que le permitían a ella llegar casi a olvidarlo también. Pero después se bebía el té de un trago y tan de prisa que apenas tenía tiempo de quitarse el sombrero, y Pinnie, con su buen ojo para todo lo relacionado con el vestir, había observado que se lo ponía con más gracia y más ladeado que nunca y lo elevaba con aire victorioso. Canturreaba, se atusaba el bigote y miraba por la ventana cuando no había nada que ver; parecía preocupado, embarcado en excursiones intelectuales, nervioso unas veces y optimista otras. Durante todo el invierno, *miss* Pynsent explicó todas las cosas con cuatro palabras entre dientes: «¡Esa mula de carga!». Claro que en la única ocasión en que buscó alivio a sus nervios acudiendo a Hyacinth no se atrevió a designarla por ningún epíteto o mote.

—Hay una cosa que me gustaría saber —dijo, como si se le ocurriera en aquel momento; pero, por su silencio previo y por lo bien que la conocía, Hyacinth ya había leído su pensamiento—. ¿Espera que te cases con ella, hijo mío?

—¿Quién es la que espera? Me gustaría ver a la mujer que lo hace.

—Ya sabes quién digo. La que vino a buscarte —y bien que te enganchó— desde la otra punta de Londres.

Ante el recuerdo de tan insufrible escena, la pobre Pinnie enrojeció de indignación un momento:

—¿No hay ya bastantes tipejos en ese barrio donde vive para que tenga que venir a hacer estragos aquí? Me gustaría saber por qué no puede conformarse con lo que tiene a mano.

Hyacinth también se había puesto colorado al oír la pregunta, y Pinnie vio en su cara algo que le hizo cambiar de tono:

—Prométeme nada más una cosa, hijo mío querido; que si te metes en algún lío con esa pieza se lo digas inmediatamente a tu pobre vieja Pinnie.

—Mi pobre vieja Pinnie a veces me pone enfermo —dijo por toda respuesta—. ¿En qué clase de lío crees que voy a meterme?

—Mira, supón que dice que has prometido casarte con ella.

—No sabes de qué hablas. Tal como ella lo ve, no quiere casarse con nadie.

—¿Y cómo demonios lo ve entonces?

—Pero ¿te imaginas que voy a contar los secretos de una señora? —contestó el chico.

—¡Ay, santo Dios! Si supiera que es una señora, no tendría ningún miedo.

—Toda mujer es señora cuando se ha puesto bajo la protección de uno —declaró Hyacinth con sus pretensiones de hombre de mundo.

—¿Bajo tu protección? ¡Ya digo! —exclamó Pinnie, asombrada—. Y haz el favor de decirme: ¿a *ti* quién te protege?

Nada más decirlo se arrepintió, porque era precisamente el tipo de pregunta que podía sacarle de quicio. Sin embargo, una de las cosas que más le gustaban de él era que su carácter podía proporcionar grandes sorpresas; tenía de repente reacciones que resultaban muy favorables. No era nada dulce cuando se esperaba que lo fuera, y en cambio era un verdadero cielo cuando no tenía por qué serlo. A Pinnie en esos momentos le daban ganas de besarle, y había intentado muchas veces hacer comprender a mister Vetch los fascinantes rasgos de carácter que descubría a cada paso en su joven amigo. Pero era una característica más bien difícil de describir, y mister Vetch no alcanzaba a ver nada que se pareciera al confuso esquema psicológico trazado por la modista. En aquellos días era para ella un consuelo, casi el único que tenía, comprobar que Anastasio Vetch entendía mucho más de lo que se esperaba entendiese. Además le tomaba en serio, y hasta parecía considerar un deber ocuparse de él. *Miss* Pynsent llegaba incluso a pensar que el violinista tenía algunos ahorros, y que nadie sabía de ninguna otra persona que tuviera que ver con él. No se lo hubiera dicho a Hyacinth por nada del mundo, por miedo también a una desilusión, pero veía en sueños un pliego guardado en alguna extraña caja de solterón (no podía imaginar qué guardaban los hombres en esos sitios), en el que el nombre del joven se había escrito con letras muy grandes en presencia de un notario.

—Desde luego, no es que esté muy protegido —contestó, sonriendo a su demasiado preocupada compañera—. Pero en todo caso, el peligro no procederá de esa chica.

—No puedo comprender por qué te gusta —comentó Pinnie, como si hubiera dedicado horas enteras a juzgar el asunto con imparcialidad.

—Da gusto oír hablar a una mujer cuando se trata de otra. Eres amable y buena y, sin embargo, estás dispuesta a… —comentó Hyacinth, con un suspiro de hombre experimentado.

—¿Qué estoy dispuesta a hacer? A lo que no estoy dispuesta es a dejar que te engullan ante mis narices.

—Pues no necesitas tener miedo. No me arrastrará hasta el altar.

—¿Cómo? ¿No te considera bastante bueno para una de los preciosos Hennings?

—No lo entiendes, pobre Pinnie mía —dijo con aire cansado—. A veces creo que no hay una sola cosa en el mundo que puedas entender. Va a casarse uno de estos días con un regidor.

—¿Con un regidor… ésa?

—Con un regidor, un banquero, un obispo o cualquier otro pez gordo. No piensa terminar ahora la carrera, piensa empezarla.

—Bueno, ¡a ver si te deja para más tarde!

Hyacinth permaneció callado un momento y luego exclamó:

—Pero ¿de qué tienes miedo? Vamos a ver si aclaramos esto de una vez. ¿Tienes miedo a que me case con una chica de una tienda?

—No lo harás, ¿verdad que no? —dijo Pinnie en tono conciliador.

—¿Crees que voy a casarme con la primera que esté dispuesta a casarse *conmigo*? Cualquier chica que pueda mirarme a mí es precisamente el tipo de chica a la que nunca miraré.

A Pinnie le dio la impresión de que lo tenía todo previsto, cosa que no la sorprendió, pues estaba acostumbrada a verle llevar las cosas hasta el final desde que era pequeño. Pero se entusiasmaba siempre al oír algo que demostrara su convicción de ser de barro fino, alguna alusión indicadora de que no era lo que parecía. No era lo que parecía, pero, ni aun con la valiosa ayuda de Pinnie había conseguido saber qué era en realidad. Para que pudiera hacerlo, ella había puesto a su disposición un idealismo apasionado que, empleado en algún caso que trajera consecuencias, podría calificarse de verdadero derroche, pero que jamás llevó a la modista a arrepentirse o sentir escrúpulos por haberlo hecho.

—Estoy convencida de que una princesa podría fijarse en ti, y no perdería nada por eso —declaró entusiasmada, pues consideraba que aquellas palabras eran la seguridad más firme que le había dado nunca y bastaban para ponerle a salvo de los peores peligros.

Para la modista el mayor peligro era que se le ocurriera casarse con una persona de su misma clase social, pero como temía al mismo tiempo que su gusto se aplebeyase le pareció conveniente, antes de dejar el tema, decirle que ya sabía que tenía que darse cuenta de todo lo que le faltaba a una chica como Millicent Henning, que estaba bien claro no merecía que se matasen por ella.

—No me preocupo de lo que le falta. Estoy contento con lo que tiene.

—¿Contento? Hijo mío, ¿qué quieres decir? —tembló la modista—. ¿Contento de que sea íntima amiga

tuya?

—Es imposible discutir estas cosas contigo —dijo Hyacinth con aire de superioridad.

—Ya lo comprendo. Pero yo creo que algunas veces tiene que aburrirte —concedió *miss* Pynsent astutamente.

—¡Vaya si me aburre a veces, de muerte!

—Entonces, ¿por qué te pasas toda la tarde con ella?

—¿Y dónde quieres que pase la tarde? ¿En alguna apestosa taberna o en la ópera italiana quizá?

Su amistad con la señorita Henning no era ni mucho menos tan íntima, pero no tenía ganas de demostrar a la pobre Pinnie que sólo disfrutaba de su compañía dos o tres veces a la semana; que otras no hacía más que vagar por las calles (su costumbre desde niño), y que algunas noches recurría a la casa de los Poupin o, si no hacía demasiado frío, charlaba y fumaba una pipa, a la puerta de cualquier casa, con un amigo mecánico. Más adelante, durante el invierno y después de haber conocido a Paul Muniment, su vida había cambiado mucho, pero Millicent siguió muy unida a ella. Odiaba el olor del vino, y más aún el de los sitios donde lo vendían. Las muestras de miseria y vicio que solía uno encontrarse en ellos le aterraban y atormentaban, y le llevaban además a hacerse preguntas que calaban aún más hondo al no encontrarles respuesta. Era para él una bendición, y un inconveniente al mismo tiempo, que el carácter delicado y artístico del trabajo que hacía en Crook, bajo la influencia de Eustache Poupin, fuera como una educación del gusto, y le enseñara a distinguir y reconocer lo escogido y a odiar lo barato. Eso hacía que la decoración brutal, chillona y atosigante de los bares, su diluvio de luces, el brillo de latón y estaño y los horrendos colores y maderas le resultasen odiosos. Era todavía muy pequeño cuando el «palacio de la ginebra» había dejado de parecerle palaciego.

Para aquel joven sin suerte, pero notablemente bien organizado, cualquier molestia o gratificación del sentido de la vista daba color a su pensamiento; y aunque vivía en Pentonville y trabajaba en Soho, aunque era pobre, desconocido, y se sentía atenazado y lleno de deseos imposibles, no había nada en la vida que tuviera para él tanto interés o valor como sus propias impresiones o ideas. Le llegaban de todo cuanto tocaba, le hacían vibrar, le mantenían casi todo el tiempo en una tensión palpitante y constituían además los principales acontecimientos y pasos de su carrera. Afortunadamente eran muchas veces una diversión inmensa. Todo lo que abarcaba su campo de observación le sugería una cosa u otra; todo le chocaba, le penetraba, le conmovía; recibía, en una palabra, y como hubiera podido decir, tantos mensajes de la vida que no sabía qué hacer con ellos; se sentía a veces como un hombre de negocios abrumado, que recibiera demasiadas cartas del correo. Claro que el hombre de negocios podía tener una secretaria pero ¿qué secretaria iba a aclararle a Hyacinth algunos de aquellos extraños mensajes de la vida? Le gustaba hablar de esas cosas, pero sólo algunas podía discutirlas con Milly. Dejaba que *miss* Pynsent se imaginara que todas sus horas libres estaban dedicadas exclusivamente a aquella señorita, y pensaba además que, aunque le diera cuenta de lo que hacía todos los días de la semana, no serviría de nada tampoco: ella seguiría aferrada a sus sospechas. Y relacionaba esa perversidad con la carga general del error que estaba condenado a soportar durante aquel crítico período de su vida. No importaba que le entendieran a uno un poco mejor o un poco peor. Claro que podía haber recordado que sí le importaba a Pinnie que, después de haberse sentido aliviada al ver la propiedad con que se expresaba sobre los asuntos matrimoniales de Millicent, había visto cómo su cariñosa y flaca carita iba alargándose poco a poco y recobraba su solemnidad acostumbrada. Eso ocurrió a medida que pasaban los días, pues no era mucho consuelo que no pensara casarse con la jovencita de Pimlico si se dedicaba a estar pegado a ella. Pero en aquel momento, y dando muestras de cierta indiferencia moral, la buena modista se limitó a declarar:

—En fin, si la ves tal como ella es, no me importa lo que hagas.

Era una mujer irreprochable, pero hacía cincuenta años que vivía en un mundo rodeado de maldad, y como otras muchas mujeres de Londres, de su misma clase y condición, tenía muy poca dulzura sentimental para su propio sexo, y consideraba que su forma corriente de «pagar» era el arreglo más natural y sencillo. Le parecía un mal menor que Millicent tuviera que lamentarse con tal de que Hyacinth pudiera salir del enredo. Entre una joven que corriera un grave riesgo y un matrimonio prematuro y poco conveniente para su querido niño sabía muy bien lo que prefería. Aparte de eso, consideraba que la capacidad de Millicent para cuidar de sí misma era tan grande que no valía la pena compadecerla por adelantado. Pinnie creía que Hyacinth era el chico más listo del mundo, o al menos de su mundo, pero su estado de ánimo la llevaba a pensar que la jovencita de Pimlico era aún más lista. Su forma de ser parecía excluir el sufrimiento, mientras que la de Hyacinth se sustentaba principalmente en él.

Después de haber disfrutado durante tres meses de la amistad del hermano y la hermana de Audley Court, toda su vida pareció cambiar; se había empapado de un ambiente novelesco que oscurecía, aunque

sin llegar en modo alguno a eclipsar, la brillante figura de Millicent Henning. Seguía ocupando un lugar muy alto, y tenía en sus manos la llave de otros horizontes igualmente amplios y frescos. Millicent, por tanto, compartía su dominio, sin saber a ciencia cierta qué era lo que apartaba a su compañero de infancia, ni pretendía pedir cuentas que ella, por su parte, tampoco estaba dispuesta a dar. En lenguaje del círculo en que se movía, Hyacinth era su capricho particular, y se alegraba de ocupar con respecto a él la misma posición eminente y hasta cierto punto irresponsable. Estaba segura de que su amistad era beneficiosa; le quería y le cuidaba como lo hubiera hecho una hermana mayor; le prevenía contra los peligros de la ciudad como nadie podía hacerlo, poniendo su firme sentido común, del que estaba convencida tenía extraordinarias reservas, al servicio de su incurable candidez y cuidándole como nadie lo había hecho jamás. Millicent hacía poco caso de la pobre modista al recordar el mísero pasado de su amigo (Pinnie no valía para ella más que una gata muerta de hambre), y disfrutaba muchísimo con su papel de guía y filósofo. Se sentía más segura que nunca cuando le daba un buen codazo o le decía: «¡Eres muy listo, sí, mucho!». Pensaba de sí misma que era lo mejor del mundo, además de ser una de las mayores bellezas y uno de los talentos más agudos, y consideraba que no había mejor prueba de la bondad de su corazón que el cariño desinteresado que sentía por aquel cachito de encuadernador. Su sociabilidad era realmente inmensa, y eran igualmente grandes su vanidad, su ordinariez, su presunción y su apetito de cerveza, dulces y entretenimientos de cualquier clase. Durante aquel período representaba para Hyacinth el eterno femenino y, si se tiene en cuenta que él era más bien cargante en cuestión de gustos, es de suponer que el juicio no resultaba muy favorable.

No es difícil creer que él mismo criticaba su inclinación, al tiempo que se entregaba a ella, y que se preguntaba muchas veces qué era lo que podía atraerle tanto en aquella chica, en la que, por otra parte, encontraba tantas cosas que condenar. Era vulgar, pesada y de una ignorancia grotesca, y su presunción resultaba comparable, ya que no tenía una pizca de tacto o de agudeza. Pero, a pesar de todo, encontraba en ella algo tan elementalmente libre, sabía llevar tan bien las ventajas que poseía, que su imagen se mezclaba constantemente hasta en las brillantes visiones que se cernían sobre él desde que Paul Muniment le había abierto aquella ventana, extrañamente situada, pero de muy largo alcance. Era decidida, generosa e imprevisible y, aunque ordinaria, no era falsa ni cruel. Reía con la risa del pueblo y si se la hería con fuerza lloraría con sus mismas lágrimas. Cuando él no dejaba volar su imaginación por los dominios de la aristocracia o la ponía a una sombra atávica para leer el último número de la *Revue des Deux Mondes*, se dedicaba a contemplaciones de muy distinta especie; se absorbía en la lucha y los sufrimientos de millones de seres cuya vida discurría por el mismo cauce que la suya y que, aunque muchas veces provocaran su disgusto, le repelieran y le hicieran volver la espalda, tenían el poder de encadenar su simpatía, de transformarla en pasión y de convencerle, al menos por entonces, de que no había más éxito en el mundo que el de hacer algo con ellos y por ellos. Todo eso, por extraño que parezca, no lo veía nunca tan claro como cuando estaba con Millicent, prueba de su fantástica y cambiante manera de ver las cosas. Porque ella no tenía semejantes ideas; puede decirse que eran las únicas ideas que no tenía. No inventaba teorías para redimir o elevar al pueblo; se limitaba a aborrecerle, con la violencia descarada de quien ha conocido la pobreza y los extraños camaradas que produce, pero en un grado muy distinto del de Hyacinth, educado (con Pinnie echándole azúcar en el té y no permitiendo que le faltaran corbatas) casi como un mocito elegante.

A Millicent, a juzgar por lo que decía, no le importaba más que mantenerse aparte y casarse con un respetable comerciante en té. Mas para nuestro héroe era magníficamente plebeya, es decir, tenía un desprecio absoluto por el peligro y todas las cualidades que pueden lucirse en una pelea callejera. Resumía todo el humor ignorante del habla de las masas, su capacidad para la violencia ofensiva y defensiva, la conciencia instintiva de su fuerza el día en que llegaran realmente a ejercerla; así como su ideal de alcanzar algo acogedor y próspero, donde las manos limpias, el pelo perfumado, las hileras de platos sobre los aparadores, los pájaros disecados cubiertos con un cristal, y los retratos de familia, muy semejantes a ellos, simbolizaran el éxito. No resultaba menos brava por ser en el fondo una descarada filistea y desear poseer delante de la casa un jardincito adornado con rocas artificiales. Conociendo al dedillo la historia de la Revolución francesa, Hyacinth podía imaginársela (si alguna vez había barricadas en las calles de Londres) con un gorro frigio en la cabeza y con su blanca garganta desnuda para cantar a voces *La marsellesa* del momento. Si la fiesta de la Diosa Razón llegaba a representarse en la capital británica —y Hyacinth podía considerar esta posibilidad sin tomarlo a broma, pues formaba parte de su religión pensar que todo era posible—, si, como digo, esa solemnidad fuera resucitada en Hyde Park, ¿quién más apropiada que *miss* Henning para figurar en ella, con gran estilo estatuario, como la heroína del momento? Estaba claro que había hechizado de alguna forma a su inconsecuente admirador, que podía asociarla con tales escenas

mientras consumía cerveza y bollos a sus expensas. Si tenía alguna debilidad era por los langostinos, y se había pasado el invierno planeando que la llevara a Gravesend, donde semejante lujo era barato y abundante, en cuanto llegara el buen tiempo. Nunca se mostraba tan franca y graciosa como cuando se detenía a explicar los detalles de un proyecto como ése; y Hyacinth tenía entonces ocasión de recordar una vez más la inmensa suerte que suponía para él que fuera una chica tan guapa; si hubiera sido fea, no habría podido escucharla; pero la extraordinaria lozanía y el gran aire de toda su persona realzaban hasta su acento, prestaban a su genio *cockney* unas luces peculiares y le concedían una amplia y constante impunidad.

XI

Quería elevar por fin su experiencia común a un nivel más alto, disfrutar de lo que ella llamaba una diversión de gran clase. Su amistad se había visto casi siempre condenada a vagar por las calles, calles oscuras y frías, envueltas en niebla, que parecían agrandarse y multiplicarse entre sus brumas perpetuas, y donde todo estaba cubierto por un hollín húmedo con un olor que le encantaba a la señorita Henning. Tenía la suerte de compartir con Hyacinth el gusto de pasear, y era aún más aficionada que él a mirar los escaparates de las tiendas, ante los que hacía largas paradas contemplativas, mientras iba eligiendo todos los artículos que no le hubiera importado ponerse encima. Él calificaba siempre de detestables los objetos que elegía, y no tenía inconveniente en decirle que era la chica de peor gusto de la ciudad. No había nada que pudiera ofenderla tanto, pues sus pretensiones de haber alcanzado un gusto exquisito resultaban ilimitadas. ¿No habían podido beneficiarse sus aptitudes naturales con la vecindad del Palacio de Buckingham (no existía prácticamente nada que no se vendiera en los almacenes de los que ella era un adorno) y el contacto diario con los más recientes productos de la industria moderna? Hyacinth se burlaba todo lo que quería de ese establecimiento y aseguraba que no había en él una sola cosa que pudiera gustarle a un verdadero artista. Ella le contestaba, también en son de burla, si la descripción correspondía a un sujeto de sus pocas pulgadas; pero, en realidad, se sentía tan fascinada como molesta por su actitud de hombre exigente, y por su increíble capacidad para establecer distingos entre las cosas más elegantes. Ella pretendía pasar por persona muy entendida, pero el chico la dejaba con la boca abierta. Cuando de tarde en tarde se dignaba señalar algún objeto que merecía su aprobación (era difícil que sucediera porque las únicas tiendas en que podían hacerse tales descubrimientos cerraban al anochecer), miraba asombrada, le daba un codazo, y decía que si alguien le regalara semejante basura la vendería por cuatro peniques. Una o dos veces le dijo que hiciera el favor de explicarle en qué consistía la superioridad de una cosa; no podía dejar de pensar que tenía que haber algo en sus juicios, y se ponía furiosa por no encontrarse también igualmente segura. Él contestaba que era inútil intentarlo; no iba a entenderlo nunca y valía más que siguiera admirando los insípidos productos de una época que había perdido el sentido de la belleza, frase que ella recordaba y que se proponía emplear en alguna ocasión, aunque le fuera imposible interpretarla.

Cuando su compañero se comportaba así, no era con intención de estrechar los lazos que le unían a su amiga de la infancia: pero el efecto sobre Millicent sí era ése, y la chica se sentía orgullosa de tener un amigo cuyos conocimientos eran de un orden tan superior que no podían explicarse. A pesar de su vanidad, no estaba tan convencida de su propia perfección que no sintiera muchas aspiraciones inalcanzables; le parecía que toda aquella sabiduría podía serle útil en algún momento y, al mismo tiempo, cuando se paraba a contemplar el despliegue iluminado con luz de gas de alguna joyería de Great Portland Street, y Hyacinth permanecía callado durante cinco minutos, mientras ella hacía los comentarios acostumbrados, estaba muy lejos de adivinar los malos pensamientos que le impedían hablar. Podía suspirar por cosas que no era probable que alcanzase; tener envidia de quien las poseía y decir que no era «mal escarnio»; pintar con todo lujo de detalles lo que haría con ellas si las tuviese, y pasar con la misma y sin la menor dificultad a cualquier otro asunto igualmente íntimo y personal. Muchas veces sentía la falta de algo de una forma aguda, pero siempre tenía el remedio a mano. Para su compañero de fatigas el caso era muy distinto, y el remedio siempre resultaba para él muy vago e inaccesible. Estaba expuesto a estados de ánimo en los que la sensación de verse excluido de todo lo que hubiera deseado en la vida caía sobre él como un sudario. Eran momentos de amargura, pero no de envidia, no sentía deseos de venganza o de expoliación imaginaria; eran simplemente estados de tristeza paralizadora, de reflexión infinitamente sombría en los que le parecía que en aquel mundo de esfuerzo y sufrimiento la vida sólo podía soportarse y el espíritu sólo se podía abrir, en las mejores condiciones, y que una lucha sórdida en la que uno se fuera a la tumba sin haberlas probado no merecía la pena, por la miseria que suponía y la desmoralización que tenía que acarrear.

En tales momentos el mundo rugiente e insensible de Londres le parecía una inmensa organización inventada para burlarse de su pobreza, de su vacío; y entonces los adornos más vulgares, los escaparates de las joyerías de tercera clase, un joven con corbata blanca y sombrero, que se dirigía a una fiesta en coche de caballos y estaba a punto de atropellarle, todos esos fenómenos familiares se transformaban en un símbolo, se hacían insolentes, desafiantes, parecían dedicarse a pincharle y a decirle que *él* estaba fuera de todo eso. Comprendía además que no podía consolarse ni refutar la idea pensando que la mayor parte de la humanidad estaba tan fuera como él y que, a pesar de todo, parecían aguantar el inconveniente bastante bien. Eso era asunto suyo; no quería saber nada de sus motivos ni de su resignación y, si habían elegido no rebelarse ni establecer comparaciones, por lo menos él, entre los desheredados, seguiría con el estandarte en alto. Cuando le daban esos ataques, sus hermanos del pueblo, colectivamente, no salían muy bien parados; no servían más que para representar en masa los intereses serviles que provocaban su desprecio, y el único reconocimiento que les debía era ver que lo ilustraban perfectamente. Todo lo que en una gran ciudad podía tocar la facultad sensible de un chico para quien nada se perdía, contribuía a convencerle de que no había en el mundo bien alguno lo bastante «oculto» que no pudiera apreciar, ningún privilegio, ninguna oportunidad, ningún lujo al que no pudiera hacer justicia. Y no era tanto que quisiera disfrutarlo como conocerlo; su deseo no era que le mimaran, sino que le iniciaran. Algunos sábados, durante los largos atardeceres de junio y julio, se encaminaba a Hyde Park a la hora en que el tropel de coches, jinetes y elegantes peatones estaba en su apogeo y, aunque últimamente Millicent le había acompañado varias veces y sus comentarios eran siempre divertidos y precisos, un tremendo drama se desarrollaba a escondidas en lo más íntimo de su conciencia. Quería ir en todos los carruajes, montar todos los caballos y sentir en su brazo la mano de todas las mujeres bonitas que había. Veía con toda claridad que pertenecía a la clase de gente a quien los «gordos», al pasar, no dedicaban ni un cuarto de segundo. Miraban a Millicent, que tenía garantizado que la mirasen en cualquier sitio, y era una de las chicas más monas donde estuviese, pero sólo servían para recordarle las barreras humanas, los profundos abismos de la tradición, los escarpados diques de los privilegios y las gruesas capas de estupidez que impedían a los que fueran como él cualquier tipo de reconocimiento social.

Y todo eso no era fruto de una vanidad enfermiza ni de una envidia tonta; su malestar personal era resultado de una intensa admiración por lo que había perdido. Había individuos a los que seguía con los ojos, con el pensamiento y hasta con los pies; parecían decirle lo que era ser la flor de una gran civilización. En algunos momentos se quedaba horrorizado al pensar que la causa que había abrazado en secreto, la causa de la que *monsieur* Poupin y Paul Muniment (sobre todo este último) habían descorrido desde hacía pocos meses la cortina, se proponía precisamente traer un estado de cosas en el que escenas como ésas fueran imposibles. Le daban vahídos de pensar que tenía que escoger; que no podía (con un mínimo respeto para su fidelidad) trabajar clandestinamente para entronizar la democracia y seguir disfrutando, aunque fuera en forma platónica, con un espectáculo basado en una odiosa desigualdad social. Tenía que sufrir con el pueblo, como lo había hecho antes, o ponerse a pedir disculpas a los otros, como a veces estaba a punto de hacerlo consigo mismo, en favor de los ricos, sobre todo teniendo en cuenta que estaba muy cercano el día en que ambas fuerzas poderosas se enzarzaran a muerte. Hyacinth se creía obligado a buscarles razones a sus sentimientos; su intimidad con Paul Muniment, que se había hecho muy grande, cargaba sobre él muchas responsabilidades de ese tipo. Muniment se reía cuando exponía sus razones, pero al mismo tiempo daba la sensación de esperar que las tuviese preparadas, y Hyacinth deseaba siempre complacerle. Había veces en que se decía que su destino podía muy bien ser el de verse dividido de tal forma torturante, desgarrado por simpatías que tiraban de él en sentidos distintos. ¿No llevaba en su sangre dos corrientes extraordinariamente mezcladas y no había visto en lo que le alcanzaba la memoria que una de las mitades estaba siempre jugándole malas pasadas a la otra o saliendo escarmentada de ella?

Aquella nebulosa, terrible y confusa leyenda sobre la historia de su madre, con respecto a la cual lo que Pinnie había podido decirle cuando empezó a hacer preguntas era excesivo por un lado, y demasiado poco por otro…, aquella explicación alucinante le había proporcionado desde entonces un centenar de teorías distintas sobre su identidad. Lo que sabía, lo que adivinaba le ponía enfermo, y lo que no sabía le atormentaba, pero en su ignorancia iluminada había llegado a formar un artículo de fe. Todo eso había ido emergiendo gradualmente desde las profundidades en que se vio sumido al lanzarle un reto a Pinnie —cuando todavía era niño—, un día, tan memorable, que había de transformar la faz de su vida entera. Era una tarde de enero y acababa de regresar de un paseo. Ella estaba, como siempre, sentada con su labor junto a la lámpara, y había empezado a decirle que uno de los huéspedes había recibido una carta en la que su cuñado le contaba que habían entrado unos ladrones en su tienda de Nottingham y se la habían saqueado. Había escuchado la historia de pie, frente a ella, y luego, de repente, en lugar de contestar había

hecho la pregunta:

—¿Quién era aquella espantosa mujer a quien me llevaste a ver hace tiempo?

La expresión de su cara, cuando la levantó hacia él, el miedo ante un ataque ya adormecido al cabo de tanto tiempo, aquella extraña mirada amedrentada, era algo que no podía olvidar, lo mismo que el tono con que repitió, casi sin aliento:

—¿Aquella espantosa mujer?

—Sí, aquella mujer de la cárcel, hace años, ya no sé cuántos tenía yo entonces, que se estaba muriendo y que me besó como nunca me habían besado, como no van a volver a besarme jamás. ¿Quién era?, ¿quién era?

Hay que confesar que la pobre Pinnie, cuando recobró el aliento, luchó con todas sus fuerzas, hizo una defensa que duró una semana entera, que iba a dejarla agotada y herida para siempre, y que necesitó la presencia de Anastasio Vetch antes de darse por terminada. Por consejo suyo, se retractó de las mentiras con que hasta entonces había tratado de distraer al chico, y acabó haciendo una confesión y un relato que él creyó era todo lo que sabía. Hyacinth nunca hubiera podido decir por qué la crisis se había producido aquel día, por qué la pregunta había saltado en aquel momento. Lo que más le extrañaba era que el germen de su curiosidad se hubiera desarrollado tan despacio; que la extraña pesadilla que parecía haber rodeado su infancia no se hubiera abierto camino durante tanto tiempo. Poco a poco también fue recobrando sus costumbres, en medio de su nueva y más punzante conciencia; y poco a poco fue reconstruyendo sus antecedentes, tomándole la medida, en lo que fuera posible, a su herencia. El valor de desenterrar de las páginas de *The Times*, en la sala de lectura del Museo Británico, el informe del juicio de su madre por el asesinato de lord Frederick Purvis, que era prolijo, pues había sido en su día una *cause célèbre*, y su decisión de sentarse bajo aquella espléndida bóveda, con la cabeza baja para ocultar sus ojos, y recorrer sílaba a sílaba el espeluznante relato, había sido una hazaña relativamente reciente. Pinnie sabía algunas cosas que le apabullaban, y había otras por las que hubiera dado una mano para aclararlas, y que le encogían el corazón al comprobar que ella las ignoraba totalmente. No llegaba a comprender qué clase de favor deseaba hacerle mister Vetch (como compensación por la bonita parte que había desempeñado en el asunto años antes) cuando se permitió juzgar a la familia del desgraciado noble por no haberse preocupado de alguna forma del hijo de la asesina. ¿Por qué iban a ocuparse si era evidente que se habían negado en redondo a reconocer la responsabilidad de su señoría? Pinnie tuvo que admitirlo ante el bombardeo de preguntas de Hyacinth; no podía pretender que lord Whiteroy y los otros hermanos (habían sido nada menos que siete y la mayoría vivían) hubieran dado muestra alguna, durante el juicio, de creer las afirmaciones de Florentine Vivier. Eso era asunto de ellos; hacía mucho tiempo había comprendido que el suyo era muy distinto. Uno no podía creer lo que quisiera, y en aquel caso, afortunadamente, no necesitaba hacer ningún esfuerzo porque, desde el momento en que empezó a considerar los hechos (por escasos, pobres y odiosos que fueran), dio por seguro que era hijo del pusilánime y sacrificado lord Frederick.

No tenía necesidad de aducir razones; su pulso y sus nervios hablaban para atestiguarlo. Su madre era hija del bravo pueblo francés, y todo lo que Pinnie podía decirle de su parentela era que había oído contar a Florentine que cuando ella era muy pequeña su padre había muerto en las ensangrentadas calles de París, en una barricada y con el fusil en la mano; pero, por otro lado, era un aristócrata inglés quien tenía que dar cuenta de él, aunque se tratara de un ejemplar de muy escaso relieve según todas las apariencias. Todo eso, con las ulteriores implicaciones que suponía, se convirtió en su artículo de fe. La idea de que era un bastardo significaba igualmente que era un caballero. Se daba cuenta de que no odiaba la imagen de su padre, como parecía natural que lo hiciera; y suponía que se debía a que lord Frederick había pagado con un tremendo castigo. La prueba moral residía para él en la exacción de ese castigo; su madre no se hubiera armado por injuria alguna que no fuera la circunstancia de la que su miserable hijo era la imagen viviente. Se había vengado porque se había visto abandonada y la amargura del daño residía en que él, desventurado chico, estaba en su regazo. Era *él* realmente a quien habían de sacrificar, se hacía esa observación muchas veces. Que su juicio sobre todo el asunto era apasionado y personal, y que no quería tener en cuenta ningún dato que le obligara a cambiarlo, lo prueba la importancia que daba a cosas como el nombre por el que su madre le había dicho a la pobre Pinnie (cuando esa bendita criatura decidió adoptarlo) deseaba que se le llamara. Hyacinth había sido el nombre de su padre, un relojero republicano, mártir de sus opiniones, cuya memoria veneraba; y cuando lord Frederick había dado señales de aparecer en su vida, había tenido motivos para preferir que le llamaran simplemente mister Robinson, motivos que, a pesar de la luz arrojada sobre ellos en el juicio, era ya muy difícil aclarar al cabo de tantos años.

Hyacinth no sabía que mister Vetch hubiera vuelto a preguntarle a Pinnie, como lo había hecho una vez, por qué si su querella contra aquel calavera elegante era cierta no había preferido que el niño llevara su

verdadero nombre en lugar de uno falso; pregunta a la que la modista había contestado con cierta ingenuidad, diciendo que no podía llamarle igual que al hombre a quien había asesinado, pues era de suponer que no querría publicar a los cuatro vientos que tenía algo que ver con un crimen del que tanto se había hablado. Si Hyacinth hubiera asistido a esa pequeña discusión se habría puesto del lado de la modista; pero que su juicio era independiente lo probaba el hecho de que los indiscretos y tímidos intentos de condolencia por parte de Pinnie no le hicieran rechazar con mal humor su propia versión. Al tener una revelación completa fue cuando comprendió las románticas alusiones que habían rodeado su infancia y que nunca había llegado a entender; le habían parecido una de las facetas de la vida profesional de la pobre mujer, tanto cortar y poner adornos, tanto dar forma, bordar, cambiar y rematar las cosas. Cuando se dio cuenta de que le había transformado en tonto ante sí y los demás, durante años enteros, le dieron ganas de pegarle, de pena y vergüenza; pero antes de administrarle la reprimenda hubo de recordar que ella sólo hablaba (aunque aseguraba que había estado muda) de un asunto, sobre el que él pasaba nueve décimas partes del tiempo meditando con aire sombrío. Cuando intentó consolarle del horror de la historia materna cantando las glorias de los Purvis y recordándole que estaba emparentado con la aristocracia de media Inglaterra, le dio la impresión de que estaba transformando la tragedia en una farsa monstruosa y, sin embargo, siguió aferrado a la idea de que era caballero de nacimiento. No le permitía decirle nada de la familia en cuestión, y aquella negativa rotunda fue uno de los motivos de la profunda desolación de sus últimos años. Si le hubiese permitido idealizarle un poco ante sí mismo, Pinnie habría creído que compensaba con ello su gran equivocación. Algunas veces veía el nombre de la familia de su padre en el periódico, pero arrancaba la página. No tenía nada que pedirles y deseaba probarse a sí mismo que podía ignorarlos (a los que estaban dispuestos a dejarle morir como una rata) tan absolutamente como le habían ignorado a él. Estaba una y mil veces a favor del pueblo y de toda posible venganza que el pueblo pudiera tomarse ante tan vergonzoso egoísmo; pero se alegraba al mismo tiempo de llevar en sus venas una sangre que podía responder de sus más elevados sentimientos.

No tenía dinero para pagar entradas en un teatro del Strand, pues Millicent Henning había dejado bien claro que en aquella ocasión esperaba algo mejor que la platea.

—¿Te gustaría el palco real o un par de butacas a diez chelines cada una? —le preguntó, con la ironía que solía ser base de todo cuanto decían.

Ella contestó que se conformaría con el anfiteatro del segundo piso, pero en la primera fila y, como esa entrada estaba todavía más allá de sus fuerzas, esperó una noche a mister Vetch, a quien ya había recurrido otras veces en momentos de apuro. Sus relaciones con el cáustico violinista eran de lo más extraño y resultaban mucho más fáciles en la práctica que en teoría. Mister Vetch le había explicado —mucho antes y sobre todo por defender a Pinnie— la parte desempeñada por él en el momento de la crisis cuando decidieron llevarle a ver a *mistress* Bowerbank, y Hyacinth, al enterarse, había preguntado con cierta pedantería por qué demonios tenía que meterse el violinista en sus asuntos privados. El vecino había contestado que no lo miraba como asunto suyo sino de Pinnie, y el chico se había olvidado de ello, pero sin llegar a reconciliarse del todo con tan oficioso crítico. Por supuesto sus sentimientos habían cambiado mucho al pensar las molestias que se había tomado mister Vetch para meterle en el taller de Crook; y en el período de que hablamos ya se había dado cuenta de que al responsable de su empleo no le importaba un comino lo que pensara de su consejo en las horas negras, y hasta le divertía mucho «seguir» la carrera de un mozo que estaba dotado de tan extraordinarias piezas. Era imposible que Hyacinth no comprendiera que la atención del violinista era bienintencionada, y el chico por aquel entonces prefería saber la verdad, por espantosa que fuera. El abrazo de su desgraciada madre parecía proporcionarle una reserva inagotable de estímulos y era siempre un apoyo para él. Lo que más le molestaba de mister Vetch era que siguiese considerándole un chico muy joven; se habría entendido mucho mejor con él si empezara a tratarle como a hombre de mundo. El oscuro virtuoso sabía muchísimo de la sociedad, y parecía saber aún más porque nunca alardeaba, había que ir descubriéndolo poco a poco; claro que eso no justificaba que quisiera dar la impresión de que lo que más le divertía del mundo era tomar un poco a broma la conversación de su joven amigo. Hyacinth creía que había demostrado tener mucha paciencia cuando de tarde en tarde tenía que ir a pedir media corona a su vecino de Lomax Place. Las circunstancias los habían unido de alguna forma y, aunque al encuadernador le molestara en parte, no dejaba de conmoverle también. Algunas veces, cuando el violinista le exasperaba, había resuelto el problema pidiéndole un favor sustancioso. Mister Vetch no se lo había negado nunca. Recordarlo le daba ánimos a Hyacinth cuando iba a llamar a su puerta, después de haber esperado a que volviera del teatro. Conocía muy bien sus costumbres: sabía que nunca se iba derecho a la cama, se quedaba una hora junto al fuego, fumando en pipa, preparando un grog y leyendo algún viejo libro. Hyacinth sabía por la luz de la ventana cuándo debía subir. Podía verla por el patio de atrás.

—Sí, ya sé que hace mucho tiempo que no vengo a verle —dijo en respuesta a la observación con que le había saludado su amigo—. Y podría decir también inmediatamente lo que me ha traído hoy… además del deseo de preguntar por su salud. Quiero llevar a una señorita al teatro.

Mister Vetch llevaba una bata muy desastrada, y la habitación olía a la bebida que estaba tomando. Despojado de sus galas nocturnas, Hyacinth le encontró tan marchito y desplumado como para presentar sus quejas el día que llegara la liquidación social; no cabía duda de que también era acreedor.

—Me temo que encuentres a tu señorita un poco cara.

—Lo encuentro todo caro —dijo Hyacinth para terminar el asunto.

—Sí, supongo que sobre todo tus sociedades secretas.

—¿Qué quiere usted decir con eso? —preguntó el chico algo nervioso.

—¡Hombre! En otoño me dijiste que ibas a unirte a unas cuantas.

—¿Unas cuantas? ¿A cuántas le parece a usted? —el chico se contuvo—. ¿Se imagina que iba a decirlo si fuera en serio?

—¡Huy, hijo, hijo! —suspiró mister Vetch—. ¿Quieres llevarla a mi teatro, eh?

—Siento decir que no quiere ir allí. Quiere algo en el Strand: ese es el caso. Está empeñada en ver *La Perla del Paraguay*. Yo no querría pagar nada a ser posible. Siento decirle que estoy sin un penique. Pero como usted conoce gente en los otros teatros y le he oído decir que a veces se hacen unos a otros pequeños favores, *à charge de revanche*, se me ocurrió que a lo mejor podía darme una invitación. Hace mucho tiempo que ponen la obra, y casi todo el mundo, menos los pobres diablos como yo, debe de haberla visto. No creo que haya lleno.

Mister Vetch escuchó en silencio y dijo:

—¿Quieres un palco?

—¡Huy, no! Algo más modesto.

—¿Y por qué no un palco? —preguntó el violinista en un tono que el chico conocía bien.

—Pues si quiere saberlo, porque no tengo el traje que la gente lleva a esos sitios.

—¿Y tu señorita lo tiene?

—Supongo que sí, parece que tiene de todo.

—¿De dónde lo saca?

—¡Ah, no lo sé! Trabaja en una tienda muy grande, tiene que estar bien vestida.

—¿Quieres fumar una pipa? —preguntó mister Vetch, acercándole una vieja petaca; y mientras el chico cogía tabaco, siguió fumando en silencio—. ¿Qué va a hacer contigo?

—¿Qué va a hacer conmigo quién?

—Tu gran belleza, la señorita Henning. Estoy enterado de todo por Pinnie.

—¡Entonces ya sabe lo que va a hacer conmigo! —respondió Hyacinth, riendo con cierta sorna.

—Sí, pero después de todo, tampoco importa demasiado.

—No sé de qué está hablando.

—Bueno, y ahora lo otro, ¿cómo lo llaman: el Subterráneo? ¿Estás muy metido en eso? —continuó el violinista como si no le hubiera oído.

—¿También se lo ha contado Pinnie?

—No, nuestro amigo Puppin me ha hablado mucho. Sabe que has metido la cabeza en algún sitio. Además, no hay más que verlo —dijo mister Vetch.

—¿Y cómo lo ve, si hace el favor?

—Porque se te han puesto unos ojos que hablan. Cualquiera puede decir, sólo con mirarte, que has hecho algún maldito juramento, que te has metido en una banda terrible. Parece que vayas diciéndole a todo el mundo: «Ni con martirio lento van a obligarme a decir dónde se reúne».

—¿Entonces no va a darme las entradas? —dijo Hyacinth en seguida.

—Hijo mío, te ofrezco un palco. Me tomo por ti el mayor interés.

Fumaron un rato en silencio, y Hyacinth dijo:

—No tiene nada que ver con el Subterráneo.

—¿Es peor todavía, más ferozmente secreto? —preguntó su compañero con toda seriedad.

—Creía que se consideraba un radical —contestó Hyacinth.

—Sí, y lo soy, pero de los anticuados, de los constitucionales, de los pasados por agua y de poca monta. No soy exterminador.

—Nosotros no sabemos lo que seremos cuando llegue la hora —observó Hyacinth, más sentenciosamente de lo que deseaba.

—¿Así que va a llegar, amigo mío?

—No creo que tenga derecho a hacer otra cosa más que prevenirle —sonrió nuestro héroe.

—Pues es muy amable de tu parte hacerlo, y presentarte aquí de madrugada con ese motivo. Entretanto, en las pocas semanas, meses o años que puedan quedar, quieres acumular la mayor cantidad de diversión posible con las señoritas. Me parece una inclinación muy natural —comentó mister Vetch, y añadió como si no tuviera importancia—: ¿Ves a muchos extranjeros?

—Sí, bastantes.

—¿Y qué te parecen?

—¡Uf, muchas cosas! Creo que prefiero a los ingleses.

—¿El señor Muniment, por ejemplo?

—Sí, ¿y qué sabe usted de él?, pregunto yo.

—Le he visto en casa de los Puppin. Ya sé que sois uña y carne.

—Se distinguirá algún día —dijo Hyacinth, que estaba encantado y realmente orgulloso de que le creyeran amigo íntimo de un hombre tan original.

—Es muy probable, sí, muy probable. ¿Y qué va a hacer contigo? —preguntó el violinista.

Hyacinth se levantó, y los dos se miraron muy serios:

—Consígame dos entradas para el segundo anfiteatro.

Mister Vetch respondió que haría lo que pudiera, y tres días más tarde entregó a su joven amigo el deseado encargo. Aprovechó la ocasión para decir:

—Sería mejor que te divirtieras lo más posible, ¿sabes?

Libro II

XII

Hyacinth y su compañera ocuparon sus asientos con muchísima prisa, antes que el telón se levantara para *La Perla del Paraguay*. Gracias al afán de Millicent por no llegar tarde tuvieron que soportar las incomodidades que según ella eran el mayor inconveniente de ir a platea: tuvieron que esperar veinte minutos a la puerta del teatro, entre una multitud apretujada e impasible, hasta la hora de abrir. Millicent, sin sombrero, pero con abundantes lazos, ofrecía un espléndido aspecto, y proporcionaba a Hyacinth un orgullo juvenil e ingenuo desde todos los puntos de vista, salvo por la tendencia, mientras se les negó el ingreso, a dar codazos a los vecinos y comentar la situación en voz alta y en tono sarcástico. Veía más claro que nunca que era una joven que, en los lugares públicos, necesitaba llevar a su lado un defensor o un campeón. Hyacinth sabía que no había más que una manera de defender a una «fémina», cuando ésta se hallaba pegada al brazo de uno, y recordaba de nuevo la escasa aversión natural que la señorita Henning sentía por las peleas. Se imaginaba que podía creer que su gusto particular no iba precisamente en esa dirección, y se dedicaba a inventar escenas confusas y violentas, en las que de alguna manera pudiera distinguirse: no sabía muy bien de qué manera, y le resultaba más fácil figurarse que le ponía fuera de combate con una réplica aguda y cortés que soltándole un puñetazo con un par de puños tan pequeños.

Cuando ocuparon sus asientos en el anfiteatro estaba más bien sofocada y de bastante mal humor; pero se había recobrado totalmente cuando se levantó el telón para la farsa que había antes del melodrama y que ninguno de los dos tenía intención de perderse. En esa nueva etapa se apoderó de ella una agitación más placentera, y se entregó con gusto a las payasadas del tradicional preludio. Hyacinth lo encontró menos divertido, pero el teatro, en cualquier caso, estaba siempre lleno de una dulce decepción para él. Su imaginación se proyectaba amorosamente sobre las luces, doraba y daba color a la raída decoración y a los castigados accesorios, y se perdía tan de veras en el mundo de ficción que, cuando terminaba la obra, fuera corta o larga, tenía una especie de sobresalto, como si fuera su propia vida la que se paraba. Era imposible estar mejor dispuesto para la ilusión dramática. Millicent, a medida que aumentaba el número de espectadores, empezó a disfrutar más y más ruidosamente, se comportaba como una *lady*, contemplaba el lugar como si lo conociera al dedillo, se recostaba o echaba hacia delante, se abanicaba con aire majestuoso, daba su opinión sobre el aspecto y el peinado de toda mujer que tuviera a su alcance, hacía preguntas y conjeturas, y sacó del bolsillo un paquetito de lágrimas de menta del que, bajo crueles amenazas, obligó a participar a Hyacinth. Seguía con atención, aunque no siempre con éxito, las complicadas aventuras de *La Perla del Paraguay*, entre lujuriantes escenarios tropicales, en que los personajes masculinos llevaban «sombreros» y puñales y las mujeres bailaban la cachucha o escapaban de alguna persecución licenciosa; pero sus ojos se dirigían de cuando en cuando a quienes ocupaban los palcos y butacas y, mientras la obra seguía su curso, comunicaba a Hyacinth las teorías que tenía sobre algunos de ellos, con gran disgusto del chico, que no concebía semejante ligereza. Tenía la pretensión de saber quién era cada cual, no individualmente o por su nombre, sino por el estrato social a que pertenecían, el barrio de Londres en que vivían y la cantidad de dinero que estaban dispuestos a gastar en la vecindad del Palacio de Buckingham. Había visto pasar a la ciudad entera por su tienda y, aunque Hyacinth la había contemplado desde niño, desde su propio punto de vista, su compañera le hacía ver que se había perdido muchas notas características. Las interpretaciones de Millicent diferían mucho de las suyas, y eran mucho más audaces e indolentes. La observación que la chica había hecho del mundo de Londres no había sido en modo alguno edificante, y tenía un cinismo natural que se imponía siempre. Creía que la mayor parte de las señoras eran hipócritas, y tenía en todos los aspectos muy baja opinión de su propio sexo, opinión que había justificado varias veces ante Hyacinth, contándole sus sorprendentes experiencias como empleada de una tienda. Resultaba, pues, una curiosa inconsecuencia que se echara a llorar en el tercer acto de la obra, cuando la «Perla del Paraguay», despeinada, fuera de sí, y arrastrándose por el suelo, imploraba de rodillas que su

«hidalgo» y severo padre creyera en su inocencia, aunque las circunstancias —un encuentro a medianoche con el malvado héroe en un bosquecillo de cocoteros— parecieran condenarla. A pesar de todo, en aquel momento culminante fue cuando le preguntó a Hyacinth quiénes eran los amigos suyos que ocupaban el palco principal a la izquierda del escenario, y cuando le dijo que uno de aquellos caballeros había estado mirándole una y otra vez durante la última media hora.

—¡Mirándome a *mí*! Eso sí que está bien. Cuando quiero que me miren, te llevo conmigo.

—Por supuesto que a mí también me ha mirado —contestó Millicent, que no tenía ningún interés en negarlo—. Pero es a ti a quien quiere echar mano.

—¿Echarme mano?

—Pues claro, pasmado; no te acobardes. Puede ser tu fortuna.

—Bueno, si quieres que venga y se siente contigo yo me voy a dar una vuelta por el Strand —dijo Hyacinth tomándolo a broma, pero sin poder ver a ningún hombre en el palco desde el sitio que ocupaba.

Millicent le dijo que el observador misterioso acababa de moverse; se había ido hacia la parte de atrás, que debía de ser muy extensa. Había allí más personas a las que no se veía; en eso Hyacinth y ella estaban de acuerdo. Una era una señora a quien tapaba la cortina; su brazo, cubierto por las pulseras, aparecía de vez en cuando sobre el antepecho tapizado. Hyacinth lo vio reaparecer y, a pesar de que la representación continuaba, estuvo mirándolo durante un rato con cierto interés, pero hasta que cayó el telón al terminar el acto no hubo indicio alguno de que un caballero quisiera echarle mano.

—¿Sigues diciendo que es a mí a quien mira? —preguntó de repente Millicent, dándole un empujón al tiempo que los violinistas de la orquesta empezaban a afinar sus instrumentos para el descanso.

—¡Claro que sí! Yo no soy más que un pretexto —contestó Hyacinth, después de haber lanzado una mirada que le parecía ser prueba de rápido dominio de sí mismo.

El caballero a quien se refería su amiga estaba otra vez en la parte delantera del palco, con los brazos apoyados en el antepecho. Hyacinth vio que le miraba directamente, y devolvió la mirada, esfuerzo que no resultó más fácil por el hecho de reconocerle al cabo de un momento.

—Bueno, si nos conoce podría hacernos alguna seña, y si no nos conoce dejarnos en paz —declaró Millicent sin hacer distinción entre su acompañante y ella.

No había terminado de decirlo cuando el caballero cumplió la primera de las condiciones mencionadas; sonrió a Hyacinth e hizo con la cabeza una seña que no dejaba lugar a dudas.

Millicent, al darse cuenta, miró al joven de Lomax Place y vio que el color se le subía a las mejillas. Se estaba poniendo como un tomate, aunque de momento no pudiera saberse si era de gusto o de turbación.

—Oye, oye, ¿es uno de tus grandes parientes? —preguntó en seguida—. Pues si se queda mirando así tan fijo, yo puedo mirar igual que él.

Luego le dijo a Hyacinth que era una vergüenza llevar a una señorita al teatro cuando no se tenían ni siquiera unos gemelos para que pudiera ver bien a la gente.

—¿Es uno de esos lores de que siempre estaba hablando tu tía en el Plise? ¿Es tu tío, tu abuelo o algún primo primero o segundo? No, es demasiado joven para ser tu abuelo. ¡Qué lástima no ver si se parece a ti!

En cualquier ocasión Hyacinth habría pensado que todas aquellas preguntas eran de pésimo gusto, pero en aquel momento estaba demasiado ocupado con otras cuestiones. Le halagaba que el caballero del palco le reconociera y se fijara en él porque hasta un detalle así suponía una extensión de su existencia social; pero no dejaba de sorprenderle y desconcertarle al mismo tiempo, y producía en su organismo, tan fácilmente excitable, una agitación que se veía en su actitud hacia Millicent y que a pesar de su presunto dominio de sí mismo no podía ocultar. El fulano del teatro y él se habían encontrado tres veces, pero en unos lugares que, en opinión de Hyacinth, era más prudente reconocer con un guiño furtivo o con un simple parpadeo, y no con una demostración tan pública. Nuestro amigo nunca se hubiera permitido saludar primero, y no porque el caballero del palco perteneciera —y estaba claro que pertenecía— a otra esfera de la sociedad. Representaba unos cuarenta años, era alto, delgado y un poco desgarbado; tenía una actitud despreocupada y cierto aire de zángano. Su cara, divertida y satisfecha, no lucía bigote ni patillas, y el pelo, castaño, peinado con raya al lado y muy bien cepillado, le caía sobre las sienes, según la moda que se ve en los retratos de 1820. Millicent le lanzó una mirada de tanto alcance y penetración que pudo distinguir los detalles de su traje de etiqueta, del que apreció la «forma», observar el gran tamaño de sus manos, notar que sonreía continuamente, que tenía unos ojos clarísimos, y que a pesar de tener las cejas oscuras y muy marcadas, su fina piel no había tenido ni iba a tener en su vida rastro de barba. La señorita le calificó para sus adentros de «elegante» de primera magnitud y estaba cada vez más intrigada por saber dónde se había encontrado con Hyacinth. Como un eco de su pensamiento, su compañero dejó escapar un pequeño suspiro, casi una exclamación de terror:

—¡Caramba! No tenía ni idea de que fuera uno de esos…

—Podías al menos decirme su nombre para que sepa cómo llamarle cuando venga por aquí a hablar con nosotros —dijo la chica, algo molesta por la reserva del acompañante.

—¿Que venga por aquí a hablar con nosotros un tipo como ése? —replicó Hyacinth.

—Pues si hubiera sido tu hermano no te habría hecho más muecas. Después de todo, a lo mejor quiere conocerme; no sería el primero.

El caballero había vuelto a desaparecer de la vista, lo que parecía corroborar la intención que la chica le imputaba.

—No estoy nada seguro de tener derecho a decir su nombre —comentó Hyacinth con gran seriedad y con no pocos deseos de realzar un incidente que mejoraba tanto el entretenimiento que le había proporcionado a la señorita Henning—. Le encontré en un sitio que a lo mejor no le gusta que se sepa.

—Pero ¿vas a sitios de los que se avergüenza la gente? Uno de tus clubs políticos, como tú los llamas, y donde ese chico sucio de Camberwell, el señor Monument (¿es ese su nombre?), te llena la cabeza de ideas que no te van a traer nada bueno. Estoy segura de que ese amigo tuyo de allí no tiene aspecto de estar de tu parte.

Hyacinth había pensado exactamente lo mismo, pero sólo le dijo a Millicent:

—Muy bien, estará de la tuya.

—¡Arrea! Espero que no sea uno de la aristocracia —exclamó Millicent, sin motivo aparente.

Hyacinth siguió la dirección de sus ojos y vio que la silla que había dejado su misterioso amigo en el palco la había ocupado una señora hasta entonces invisible, y que no era la misma que había mostrado antes parte del hombro y del brazo. Ésta era una dama mayor, envuelta en un chal blanco, grande y arrugado; una mujer corpulenta y rara, que tenía aire de extranjera y llevaba peluca. Tenía un aspecto plácido y tranquilo y una cara redonda y arrugada en la que brillaban unos ojos pequeños y vivos. Llevaba unos guantes blancos y más bien sucios, demasiado grandes para ella, y alrededor de la cabeza, en sentido horizontal, como para mantener la peluca en su sitio, una tira estrecha y brillante, adornada en el centro con una joya que inducía al espectador a suponer que era falsa.

—¿La señora vieja es su madre? ¿Y dónde ha desenterrado esas ropas? Da la impresión de que las ha alquilado para la velada. ¿También va *ella* a tu maravilloso club? Apostaría a que le falta tiempo —continuó Millicent.

Cuando Hyacinth dijo que podía no ser la madre del caballero, sino su mujer o su capricho del momento, la chica declaró que en ese caso podía acercarse a verlos, porque no sentía ningún miedo. ¡No le extrañaba nada que quisiera salir de ese palco! La de la peluca —¡y vaya peluca!— se había situado allí para mirarlos, pero ella no se consideraba muy honrada por atraer la atención de un adefesio semejante. Hyacinth pretendía demostrar que la señora le parecía muy bien y que le encontraba un encanto especial; se apostaba otro paquete de lágrimas de menta a que sería una viuda rica y, desde luego, con título. Millicent, como persona experimentada, contestó que nunca había creído que la verdadera belleza se encontrara entre las clases altas, pero su acompañante veía que estaba mirando con disimulo si aparecía su extraño camarada de club y que iba a tener una gran desilusión si no lo hacía. Hyacinth no se sentía celoso porque le preocupaba mucho más otra cara del asunto, y si hacía comentarios en broma era porque estaba nerviosísimo, asombrado por un incidente cuyas consecuencias no podría adivinar el lector. Lo que le impresionaba no era la satisfacción de verse apadrinado por un hombre rico; era simplemente la posibilidad de hallar nuevas experiencias, una sensación por la que estaba siempre dispuesto a dar lo que tuviera; no dudaba de que si el hombre con quien había hablado en un pequeño cuarto trasero de Bloomsbury como capitán Godfrey Sholto —el capitán le había dado su tarjeta— había dejado el palco para ir a verle era por motivos más serios de los que suponía Millicent, y porque traía consigo una misión especial. El pensar en esa posibilidad le tenía suspenso y preparado a un mismo tiempo. Por eso, cuando vio que la chica volvía la cabeza y le tomaba la medida a alguien que estaba detrás de ellos, sintió que el destino, por una vez y en contra de su costumbre, hacía por él cuanto podía esperarse. Se levantó, pero no lo bastante de prisa para ver que el capitán Sholto había estado un momento contemplando a Millicent y que ella, por su parte, le había valorado debidamente. El capitán tenía las manos en los bolsillos y llevaba el sombrero echado hacia atrás. Sonreía a la pareja del anfiteatro de la manera más amistosa, como si les conociera desde hacía años, y Millicent, al verle de cerca, comprobó que era un hombre distinguido, de aire amable y natural, y que medía por lo menos seis pies de altura, aunque tuviera la costumbre afectada o habitual de andar un poco encorvado. Hyacinth, después del primer momento, tuvo la sensación de que los trataba como a un par de chiquillos a los que quisiera sorprender, pero cambió de idea al ver que le ponía la mano en el hombro y decía, mientras permanecía de pie en el estrecho pasillo que los separaba de los asientos ocupados por los

colegas de mister Vetch:

—Querido muchacho, me parecía necesario venir a hablar contigo. Tengo la cabeza trastornada con esta porquería de obra. Y esos palcos son asfixiantes, ¿sabes? —añadió, como si Hyacinth conociera tan bien como él esa parte del teatro.

—Aquí también hace bastante calor —respondió el acompañante de Millicent.

De repente se había dado cuenta de que hacía mucho calor y de que había encima una lámpara tremenda, y luego comentó que el argumento de la obra era realmente absurdo, pero que la interpretación le parecía bien.

—¡Ah, claro! Es la vieja y positiva tradición inglesa. Éste es el único sitio donde todavía puedes encontrarla, y me temo que tampoco por mucho tiempo; no puede sobrevivir al viejo Baskerville y a *mistress* Ruffler. ¡Dios santo, qué viejos son! Yo la recuerdo a ella, ya muy lejos de la primera juventud, cuando me traían al teatro de pequeño, en las vacaciones de Navidad. Entre los dos deben de sumar unos ciento ochenta, ¿eh? Y creo que se espera llore uno mucho hacia la mitad de la obra.

El capitán Sholto continuó hablando de la misma manera amistosa y familiar, dirigiéndose a Millicent, de quien apenas había apartado los ojos desde el principio. Ella le sostenía la mirada con compostura, pero con la reserva suficiente para dar a entender (y era verdad) que no tenía costumbre de conversar con caballeros que no le hubieran presentado antes. Volvió la cara (ya le había concedido el privilegio de verla) y le dejó en el pasillo, apoyado en la barandilla del anfiteatro, de espaldas al escenario, y cara a cara con Hyacinth que, un poco repuesto y más consciente que antes, se preguntaba a qué habría venido. Quería hacer honor a su amabilidad, pero no sabía de qué podía hablarse con un hombre que se presentaba así y que, por hacerlo de una forma tan natural, demostraba tener mucho mundo. En seguida comprendió que el capitán Sholto no tomaba la obra en serio, lo que le privaba de acudir a ese tópico, sobre el que tenía mucho que decir. Por otro lado, tampoco podía aludir, en presencia de una tercera persona, a los asuntos que habían discutido en el Sol y Luna; no podía suponer que el visitante esperara que lo hiciera, aunque le daba la impresión de ser hombre caprichoso y dispuesto a divertirse con cualquier cosa, incluido el socialismo esotérico, y un pequeño encuadernador que tenía de caballero mucho más de lo que pudiera imaginarse. El capitán Sholto podía sentirse un poco incómodo una vez embarcado en la tarea de fraternizar y sin haber conseguido arrancar una sonrisa a la extraña respetabilidad de Millicent, pero dejó la carga sobre los hombros de Hyacinth y dijo que era precisamente la idea de que la vieja tradición británica estaba a punto de morir lo que le había llevado allí aquella noche. Estaba con una amiga, una señora que había vivido mucho en el extranjero, que no había visto nunca nada de ese género y a quien gustaba todo lo que fuera típico:

—Ya sabe usted que la escuela de interpretación extranjera es una cosa muy distinta —dijo, dirigiéndose otra vez a Millicent.

—¡Ah sí, naturalmente! —contestó la chica esta vez y, al contemplar de nuevo a la señora del palco, pensó que hacía el efecto de que en el mundo no había nada que no hubiera visto.

—Nosotros no hemos estado nunca en el extranjero —dijo Hyacinth con toda candidez, mientras miraba los claros y curiosos ojos de su amigo, que tenían el más pálido tinte que había visto en su vida.

—Bueno, se dicen muchas tonterías sobre eso —comentó el capitán Sholto.

Hyacinth se quedó sin entender lo que quería decir, y Millicent aventuró un comentario:

—Están armando un jaleo tremendo en el escenario. Me parece que en esos palcos no se debe de estar nada bien.

Se oía un gran estruendo detrás del telón, el ruido de grandes decorados llevados de un lado a otro.

—¡Ah, sí, se está muchísimo mejor aquí! Yo creo que tienen las mejores localidades del teatro —dijo el visitante—. Me gustaría quedarme con ustedes. La cosa es que tengo señoras… dos —añadió, como si estuviera considerando en serio esa posibilidad.

Luego volvió a poner la mano en el hombro de Hyacinth, le sonrió un momento y dijo en un acceso de franqueza aún mayor que el de antes:

—Querido muchacho, precisamente ésa ha sido en parte la razón de que viniera a verte. Una de esas señoras tiene un gran deseo de conocerte.

—¿De conocerme?

Hyacinth notó que palidecía; su primer impulso en relación con semejante anuncio —y era algo que sentía profundo e inexplicable— fue imaginar que tenía algo que ver con el parentesco por parte de su padre. La lisa y brillante cara del capitán Sholto pareció flotar un momento ante él, mientras hacía tan inesperados avances.

El capitán siguió diciendo que le había hablado a la señora de las conversaciones que habían tenido, que

estaba muy interesada en esos temas —«Ya sabes lo que digo, lo está realmente»—, y que por eso le había rogado que fuera a preguntar a… su amigo (Hyacinth vio que el capitán había olvidado su nombre) si no tenía inconveniente en ir a verla.

—Tiene un enorme deseo de encontrarse con alguien que mire todo este asunto desde tu punto de vista, ¿comprendes? Y claro, en la posición que ocupa, casi no tiene ocasión de encontrarle… lo que siente muchísimo. Por eso, en cuanto te descubrí esta noche, dijo inmediatamente que tenía que presentarte. Espero que no te importe: es sólo un cuarto de hora. Quizá debiera decirte que es una persona acostumbrada a que no se le niegue nada. «Sube y tráemelo», ya sabes, como si fuera tan sencillo. Realmente está muy interesada, no quiero decir en conocerte, eso ya se entiende, sino en todo el asunto, el tuyo y el mío. Debo añadir también, no es ningún inconveniente, que es la mujer más encantadora del mundo, ni más ni menos. A decir verdad, chico, quizá sea la mujer más notable de Europa.

El capitán Sholto se desahogó así, con la mayor naturalidad y mesura, y Hyacinth, que le escuchaba, pensaba si no debía rechazar la idea de servir de diversión a los caprichos y la presunción de unos bromistas, pero por otro lado pensaba que no, que le convenía más, si quería desempeñar el papel a que aspiraba en la vida, aprovechar esas ocasiones, tomarlas con calma y educación, y no molestarse en rechazarlas. Desde luego, la señora del palco no podía ser sincera; a lo mejor creía que lo era, pero hasta eso resultaba discutible. No podía importarle a uno la causa defendida en el cuarto trasero de Bloomsbury, cuando se acudía al teatro de semejante manera; claro que ése era también el estilo del capitán Sholto, pero Hyacinth no estaba ni mucho menos seguro de que a él le importase. En todo caso, no era ocasión de debatir la sinceridad de la señora, y pasados sesenta segundos el joven había decidido que podía permitirse complacerla. No por eso dejaban las cosas de bailar alrededor, de parecer ficticias y fantásticas, así que fue como volver a la realidad cuando Millicent, después de haber estado mirándolos a los dos, exclamó:

—Todo eso está muy bien pero ¿quién se queda *conmigo*?

Su aire majestuoso la había abandonado y era su naturaleza la que aparecía. Pero nada tan agradable y atento como la forma en que el capitán Sholto se dispuso a tranquilizarla:

—Querida señorita, ¿puede imaginarse que no he pensado ya en eso? Siempre he esperado que después de acompañar a nuestro amigo y presentarle, podría permitirme volver aquí y ocupar su puesto durante su ausencia.

Hyacinth estaba preocupado con la idea de ir a encontrarse con la mujer más notable de Europa, pero en aquella coyuntura miró a Millicent Henning con cierta curiosidad. Ella supo ponerse a la altura:

—Le estoy muy agradecida, pero no sé quién es usted.

—¡Huy, eso voy a aclararlo en seguida! —dijo benevolente el capitán.

—Sí, naturalmente que voy a presentarlos —dijo Hyacinth, y comunicó a la señorita Henning el nombre de su distinguido amigo.

—¿En el ejército? —preguntó la señorita, como si necesitara toda suerte de garantías.

—Sí… bueno, en la armada. He dejado el ejército, pero siempre se le pega a uno.

—Mister Robinson, ¿tiene usted intención de dejarme? —preguntó Millicent en un tono de la más acabada propiedad.

La imaginación de Hyacinth había emprendido tal vuelo que la idea de lo que le debía a la bella muchacha que se había puesto aquella noche bajo su protección casi se le había borrado. Sus palabras se lo recordaron y no tardó en volver por sus fueros; pero había algo en la manera de decirlas que le hizo mirarla fijamente antes de responder:

—No, querida, por supuesto que no. Tengo que dejar para otra ocasión el honor de conocer a su amiga —dijo, dirigiéndose al capitán.

—Pero, hombre, si podríamos arreglarlo con tanta facilidad —murmuró el caballero, visiblemente desilusionado—. Eso no significa que *miss*… *miss*… tenga que quedarse sola.

A Hyacinth se le pasó por la cabeza que quizá todo el proyecto respondiera únicamente al deseo del capitán Sholto de hacer algún avance ante las buenas prendas de Millicent; se preguntaba por qué la mujer más notable de Europa se prestaba a semejantes planes y accedía a recibir a un don nadie de encuadernador sólo por llevarlos adelante. Después de todo, a lo mejor no era la más notable, pero, mirándolo bien, ¿de qué podía servirle a ella? Con gran sorpresa de Hyacinth, la cara de Millicent expresaba que había comprendido su renuncia y, como si estuviera considerando el asunto con toda imparcialidad, preguntó al capitán Sholto:

—¿Podría saberse el nombre de la señora que le ha enviado a usted?

—La princesa Casamassima.

—¡Arrea! —exclamó Millicent Henning, y en seguida, para cubrir un poco el descuido, añadió—: ¿Y

podría saberse también de qué quiere hablar con él?

—De las clases bajas, de la naciente democracia, la expansión de las ideas y todas esas cosas.

—¿Las clases bajas? ¿A ver si cree que nosotros pertenecemos a ellas? —preguntó con una extraña y provocadora carcajada.

Pero el capitán Sholto era hombre muy rápido:

—Si pudiera verla a usted, pensaría que es una de las primeras damas del país.

—Pues no va a verme en su vida —respondió Millicent, para dejar bien claro que por lo menos a ella podían renunciar a llamarla.

Pero lo de que a uno le llamara una princesa era una indignidad que Hyacinth había visto soportar de muy buen grado a varios héroes de las novelas francesas, que tanto le entusiasmaban; sin embargo, se mantuvo incorruptible, y respondió al capitán, que seguía planeando por allí como un Mefistófeles convertido:

—Habiendo estado en el ejército, sabrá usted que uno no puede abandonar su puesto.

El capitán, por tercera vez, puso las manos en los hombros de su amigo, y durante un minuto estuvo sonriendo en silencio a Millicent:

—Si te digo sencillamente que quiero hablar con esta señorita, me imagino que no voy a mejorar las cosas, y no hay razón para que lo logre. En vista de eso voy a decirte la pura verdad: quiero hablar con ella de ti.

Y le dio a Hyacinth unos golpecitos que parecían garantizar que esa idea había de favorecerle ante su compañera, y que él, por su parte, le apreciaba muchísimo.

Hyacinth se daba perfecta cuenta de todo ese aprecio, pero dijo a Millicent que haría lo que a ella le pareciese; estaba decidido a no permitir que un miembro del justamente condenado patriciado pudiera suponer que estimaba en poco a una hija del pueblo.

—No me importa que vayas —dijo Millicent—. Y más vale que te des prisa porque están subiendo el telón.

—¡Es usted un encanto! —exclamó el capitán—. Vuelvo en tres minutos.

Agarró del brazo a Hyacinth y, como el chico no acababa de decidirse y continuaba mirando a Millicent, la chica dijo con todo su estupendo descaro:

—Me gustaría a mí saber algo de semejante princesa.

—¡Ah, se lo contaré también! —respondió el capitán con toda naturalidad, mientras se llevaba a su amigo.

Hay que confesar que Hyacinth también se preguntaba qué clase de princesa sería aquélla, y su impaciencia por saberlo hacía que le latiera de prisa el corazón cuando, después de atravesar empinadas escaleras y corredores tortuosos, llegaron a la puerta del palco.

XIII

La primera impresión que tuvo al abrir su acompañante fue lo cerca que estaba el escenario, sobre el que había vuelto a alzarse el telón. La obra continuaba, y las voces de los actores llegaban tan claras al palco que era imposible hablar sin estorbarlos. Eso fue al menos lo que pensó al ver cómo su conductor le introducía sin hacer ruido, le señalaba una silla y susurraba:

—Déjate caer ahí; lo verás y oirás perfectamente.

Oyó que se cerraba la puerta, y comprendió que el capitán Sholto se había marchado. Millicent no tendría que estar mucho tiempo sola. Dos señoras estaban sentadas en la parte delantera del palco, tan grande que todavía quedaba un considerable espacio entre ellas; y mientras permanecía allí, donde el capitán Sholto le había dejado —parecían no haberse dado cuenta de que se abría la puerta—, volvieron la cabeza y le miraron. La primera en quien puso los ojos era la extraña señora que ya había visto de lejos, de cerca resultaba todavía más extraña, y le hizo una inclinación de cabeza amistosa y acogedora. La otra estaba tapada en parte por la cortina del palco, corrida hacia delante con intención de ocultarla a las miradas de la gente; era todavía joven, y la forma más sencilla de expresar el efecto que su gesto de bienvenida produjo en Hyacinth, es decir que le deslumbró. Continuaba en el mismo sitio en que le había dejado Sholto, mirando fijo y más bien azorado, y sin osar moverse. La señora joven tendió la mano —era la izquierda, la otra la apoyaba en el antepecho del palco— con la esperanza, como pudo ver con desesperación pero, demasiado tarde, de que el chico le diera la suya. Transformó el gesto en una señal, y le indicó en silencio, pero con gracia, que acercara la silla. Lo hizo, y quedó sentado entre las dos; durante diez minutos no se atrevió a apartar los ojos del escenario, ni siquiera para mirar a Millicent, que estaba arriba, en el anfiteatro. Miraba la obra, pero estaba muy lejos de verla; lo único que sentía era a la mujer que estaba allí sentada junto a él, a la derecha, y que parecía despedir una fragancia de sus vestidos y una luz de toda su persona, que creía verla aunque tuviera la cabeza vuelta para el otro lado. La visión no había durado más que un momento, pero permanecía suspendida delante de él y derramaba una vaga neblina sobre todo lo que ocurría en el escenario. No sabía si debía hablar, volver a mirarla o hacer cualquier otra cosa; pensaba si le tomaría por un payaso o por un idiota, y si sería realmente tan guapa como le había parecido o se trataría sólo de un brillo superficial que desapareciera al verla más de cerca. Mientras él cavilaba, iban pasando los minutos y ninguna de las dos decía una palabra; contemplaban el espectáculo en absoluto silencio, así que se imaginó que eso era lo que había que hacer y que debía permanecer mudo hasta que se dirigieran a él. Poco a poco fue recobrándose, entró en posesión de sus facultades, y dirigió los ojos a la princesa. Ella lo notó en seguida, y le devolvió la mirada con gran benevolencia. Desde luego podía ser una princesa, era imposible responder mejor a todo lo evocado por esa romántica palabra. Era hermosa, resplandeciente, esbelta, con una majestad natural. Su belleza parecía perfecta, asombraba y le elevaba a uno, contemplarla era un privilegio, una recompensa. Si la primera impresión que le había producido a Hyacinth era la de sentirse extrañamente transportado no tenía que achacarla a su sencillez, pues ése era el efecto que la princesa Casamassima producía en personas de mucha mayor experiencia y de mayores pretensiones. Sus ojos, oscuros, pero de un tono que no era castaño, más bien azul o gris, eran tan amables como espléndidos, y tenía una forma de sostener la cabeza que resultaba extraordinariamente noble y graciosa. Aquella cabeza donde brillaban dos o tres diamantes en el pelo, que definía su forma le recordaba a Hyacinth alguna cosa antigua y famosa, algo que había admirado hacía tiempo —el recuerdo era vago— en una estatua o en un cuadro de un museo. Pureza de líneas y formas en las mejillas, los labios, la barbilla y la frente, un color que parecía brillar y vivir, algo que irradiaba gracia, distinción y acierto: todo eso se mostraba en la cara de la princesa, y su visitante, mientras permanecía en la silla, temblando ante la revelación, se preguntaba si estaría hecha de la misma pasta que las otras personas que había visto hasta entonces. Podría ser divina, pero veía que no dejaba de comprender las necesidades humanas, que deseaba

se encontrara a gusto y feliz; su amabilidad tenía algo familiar, como si le hubiera visto antes muchas veces. Llevaba un vestido oscuro y rico, un collar de perlas en el cuello, y un abanico antiguo y rococó en la mano. Fue dándose cuenta de todas esas cosas y acabó por decirse que, si no quería nada más de él, se daba por satisfecho, el juego podía continuar; resultaba muy agradable verse entronizado con unas hermosas damas, en un recinto espacioso y en penumbra, que enmarcaba la brillantez del escenario y parecía un espectáculo más dentro de la propia obra. El acto era muy largo, y el reposo en que le dejaban las señoras podía ser una caridad calculada, para que fuera acostumbrándose a ellas y viera lo inofensivas que eran. Miró a Millicent al cabo de un rato y vio que el capitán Sholto, sentado junto a ella, no se comportaba con tanta propiedad, pues le hacía una observación cada pocos minutos. La señorita del anfiteatro se estaba perdiendo la obra igual que él, por no quitarle ojo a su amigo de Lomax Place, cuya posición trataba de calibrar. Se había olvidado totalmente de las complicaciones del Paraguay, y la atención que hubiera podido volver a prestarles pasada media hora se le fue en pensar qué le diría la princesa cuando cayera el telón, o si no le diría nada. La consideración de ese problema, a medida que el desenlace se acercaba, le ponía a galope el corazón. Miraba a la señora de la izquierda y encontraba muy natural que una princesa llevara una acompañante —daba por seguro que era una acompañante— y que la eligiera lo más distinta posible a ella. Aquella vieja señora carecía de gracia o majestad; arrellanada en su asiento, con los labios abultados y las manos cruzadas sobre el estómago, contemplaba solemne la representación. Sin embargo, varias veces volvió la cabeza hacia Hyacinth, y en tales momentos su expresión cambiaba: repetía el mismo gesto jovial, de ánimo y casi maternal con que le había saludado al hacer él una inclinación, y con el que parecía dar a entender que comprendía mucho mejor todo lo anormal de su posición que la serena belleza que tenía al lado. Daba la impresión de decirle que no perdiera la cabeza y que, si sucedía lo peor, allí estaba ella para echarle una mano. Cuando por fin bajó el telón, pasaron todavía unos momentos antes de que la princesa hablara, aunque sonreía a su invitado, como si estuviera pensando qué le gustaría más que le dijera. Podría haber adivinado en aquel momento lo que descubrió más tarde, que entre los defectos de la dama (y estaba destinado a aprender que eran numerosos), no era el menor su miedo a los lugares comunes. Él esperaba que dijera algo sobre la obra, pero lo que dijo, muy gentil y amablemente, fue:

—Me gusta conocer a toda clase de gente.

—No creo que encuentre la menor dificultad para hacerlo —contestó Hyacinth.

—¡Huy! Cuando uno quiere algo de veras, es seguro que resulta difícil. No todo el mundo es tan amable como usted.

Hyacinth no pudo encontrar con rapidez la respuesta apropiada, pero la señora vieja le sacó del apuro, diciendo con acento extranjero:

—Yo creo que ha sido usted extraordinariamente bueno. No creía que viniera a ver a dos mujeres desconocidas.

—Sí, somos dos mujeres extrañas —dijo la princesa pensativa.

—No es verdad que encuentre las cosas difíciles; hace que todo el mundo haga lo que quiere ella —continuó su compañera.

La princesa la miró y luego le dijo a Hyacinth:

—Su nombre es *madame* Grandoni.

El tono no era familiar, pero tenía un matiz afortunado, como si verdaderamente se hubiera tomado tantas molestias por ellas que estuvieran obligadas a atenderle. Parecía significar también que la aptitud de *madame* Grandoni para hacerlo resultaba obvia.

—Pero no soy italiana, ¡no! —exclamó la vieja—. A pesar de mi apellido, soy una honrada, fea y desgraciada alemana. Pero *celà n'a pas d'importance*. Ella, con semejante nombre, no es italiana tampoco. Es pura casualidad; el mundo está lleno de casualidades. Pero tampoco es alemana, la pobre.

Madame Grandoni parecía responder a la idea de la princesa, y Hyacinth la encontraba sumamente pintoresca. Al cabo de un momento comentó:

—La joven que estaba con usted era encantadora.

—Sí, es encantadora —contestó Hyacinth, satisfecho de tener ocasión de decirlo.

La princesa no dijo nada sobre ese asunto, y Hyacinth comprendió que desde el sitio que ocupaba en el palco no podía haber visto a Millicent, pero que aunque la hubiera visto no habría hecho ningún comentario. Por eso preguntó, como si no hubiera oído nada:

—¿Encuentra la obra muy interesante?

Hyacinth vaciló, y acabó por decir la verdad:

—Tengo que confesar que el último acto me lo he perdido entero.

—¡Ay, pobre muchacho! —exclamó *madame* Grandoni—. ¿Lo ves, lo ves?

—¿Qué es lo que veo? —preguntó la princesa—. Si le aburre estar aquí ahora, le gustará más tarde; eso espero al menos. Estamos muy interesadas en todas las cosas que le preocupan a usted. Sentimos un gran interés por el pueblo.

—¡Ah, perdona, perdona!, y habla sólo por ti misma —le interrumpió la señora—. A mí no me interesa nada el pueblo; yo no los entiendo ni sé nada de ellos. Respeto siempre a cualquier persona honrada, sea de la clase que sea, pero no puedo pretender sentir una gran pasión por las masas ignorantes, porque no la siento. Además, eso no tiene nada que ver con el caballero.

La princesa Casamassima tenía facilidad para ignorar completamente lo que no le apetecía tener en cuenta; no era en absoluto una actitud desdeñosa, sino una ausencia pensativa, tranquila y conveniente, tras la cual volvía al punto que deseaba sacar a luz. No hizo ninguna protesta ante las palabras de su compañera, pero le dijo a Hyacinth, como si comprendiera vagamente que se había metido en un terreno algo absurdo:

—Vive conmigo; ella lo es todo para mí, y la mujer más buena del mundo.

—Sí, afortunadamente, y con muchos defectos superficiales, soy tan buena como el pan —admitió *madame* Grandoni.

Hyacinth estaba ya un poco menos azorado que al llegar al palco, pero su asombro no era menor. Volvía a pensar si no estarían utilizándole con algún fin inconcebible; le parecía tan extraño que dos ejemplares de otro mundo tan distinto al suyo se tomaran la molestia de hablar una de otra ante un vulgar encuadernador, que no podía comprenderlo. Esa idea le hizo ruborizarse, hubiera debido ocurrírsele que había caído en una trampa. Se daba cuenta de que parecía asustado, y también de que lo había notado la princesa. Eso debió de ser lo que le hizo decir:

—Si se ha perdido tanto de la obra, podría contarle lo que ha pasado.

—¿Y crees que iba a seguirla ahora? —preguntó *madame* Grandoni.

—Si quisieran decirme… si quisieran decirme…

Hyacinth se paró. Había estado a punto de decir: «Si quisieran decirme qué significa todo esto, sería muchísimo mejor», pero las palabras murieron en sus labios y se quedó allí mirando, porque la mujer que tenía a la derecha era demasiado guapa. Demasiado guapa para preguntarle nada, para juzgarla de acuerdo con la lógica; y además, ¿cómo podía saber él lo que era natural en una persona que encerraba semejante gracia y esplendor? A lo mejor tenía la costumbre de enviar todas las tardes por algún tonto para pasar el rato; quizá fuera lo normal entre la aristocracia extranjera. Su cara no mostraba ninguna dureza, al menos de momento, sólo mostraba una amabilidad luminosa, y además parecía atisbar lo que él estaba pensando. No hizo nada por tranquilizarle, pero había casi un mundo de ternura en el tono con que comentó:

—¿Sabe usted que me temo que se me ha olvidado ya todo lo que estaba pasando? Es horriblemente complicado; no sé, a alguien le tiraban por un precipicio.

—¡Vaya! Sois una pareja brillante —dijo *madame* Grandoni riéndose—. Yo podría contarlo todo. La persona a quien tiraban por un precipicio es el héroe virtuoso, y veréis cómo, a pesar de todo, en el próximo acto aparece tan campante.

—No nos cuentes nada, tengo que preguntar muchas cosas.

Hyacinth había vuelto la cara con aire suplicante, al verse «emparejado» con la princesa, y notó además que estaba mirándole.

—¿Qué piensa del capitán Sholto? —preguntó ella de repente. Y con gran sorpresa del chico, si quedaba algo que pudiera sorprenderle y, al ver que vacilaba, sin saber qué decir, añadió—: ¿Verdad que es un tipo muy curioso?

—Le conozco muy poco.

Nada más haber pronunciado esas palabras, tuvo la sensación de que eran muy poco brillantes, que resultaban pobres, vulgares y muy poco a propósito para satisfacer a la princesa. En realidad, hasta entonces no había dicho nada que pudiera situarle bajo una luz favorable, por eso continuó, ya a lo que saliera:

—Quiero decir que no le he visto nunca en casa —frase que le sonó mucho más tonta todavía.

—¿En casa? Si no está nunca en casa; está en cualquier lugar del mundo. Esta noche, por ejemplo, podía haber estado en el Paraguay lo mismo que ha estado aquí, aunque ¡menudo sitio para estar! —sonrió—. Es lo que llaman un cosmopolita. No sé si conoce usted esa especie; es muy moderna, cada vez más frecuente y espantosamente pesada. Yo prefiero a los chinos. Me había hablado mucho de la charla tan interesante que tuvieron. Eso es lo que me hizo decir: «¡Huy!, dile que venga a verme. Una pequeña charla interesante siempre es un cambio, ¿no?».

—¡Es muy amable conmigo! —dijo *madame* Grandoni.

—¡Bah!, tú y yo ya sabes que no hablamos nunca, nos entendemos sin necesidad de hacerlo. —La princesa continuó, dirigiéndose a Hyacinth—: ¿No admiten nunca mujeres?

—¿Que si admitimos mujeres…?

—Sí, en esas sesiones… ¿cómo les llaman?, esas pequeñas reuniones de que me habla el capitán Sholto. A mí me encantaría asistir. ¿Por qué no?

—No he visto nunca señoras. No sé si es una norma, pero no he visto más que hombres —dijo Hyacinth.

Luego, sonrió y, aunque el descuido le parecía más bien grave y no acababa de comprender el papel que estaba haciendo el capitán Sholto ni cómo le habían admitido en el pequeño círculo subversivo de Bloomsbury, frecuentando a personas tan importantes, dijo:

—No estoy muy seguro de que haga bien comentando por ahí lo que hacemos.

—Ya comprendo. Quizá cree que es un espía, un *agent provocateur* o cosa por el estilo.

—No —dijo Hyacinth—. Yo creo que un espía tendría más cuidado, disimularía mejor. Aparte de eso, lo que ha oído es muy poco, después de todo.

Hablaba como si estuviera más bien divertido.

—¿Quiere decir que no ha estado realmente entre bastidores? —preguntó la princesa, inclinándose un poco hacia delante y dedicándole ya decididamente sus hermosos ojos, como si pensara que a aquellas alturas ya no había de encogerse ante semejante atención—. Por supuesto que no ha estado ni va a estarlo nunca. Él ya lo sabe, y sabe que no puede contar ningún verdadero secreto. Lo que me dijo a mí era interesante, pero no me pareció que hubiera nada que pudiera obligar a intervenir a las autoridades. Lo que más le llamó la atención, y lo que más me la ha llamado a mí, como ya he dicho, fue la conversación que tuvo con usted. Quizá no supiera que le estaba sonsacando.

—Creo que es más bien fácil hacerlo —respondió Hyacinth ingenuamente.

Recordaba que se había hinchado a hablar en Bloomsbury, y que le había parecido muy natural que su camarada le ofreciera puros y diera tanta importancia a las opiniones de un artesano original y listo.

—Yo no estoy tan segura de eso. De todas formas no debe tener miedo del capitán Sholto. En un hombre totalmente honrado en todo lo que hace y, aunque hubiera confiado en él más de lo que parece haberlo hecho, sería incapaz de traicionarle. A pesar de todo, no confíe en él: no porque no sea de fiar, sino porque… —la princesa volvió a coger el hilo—. No importa, podrá comprobarlo. Se ha metido en eso sólo por complacerme. Debiera decirle, aunque sólo sea para que lo entienda, que estaría dispuesto a meterse en cualquier cosa. En fin, eso es asunto suyo. Yo quería saber algo, enterarme de algo para ver qué es lo que pasa. Y para una mujer todo eso es muy difícil, sobre todo para una mujer de mi posición, que es insoportablemente conocida y a quien es seguro que siempre se achacará mala fe. ¡Pobre hombre, ha tenido que meterse en tantas cosas! Lo que yo quería realmente era que se hiciese amigo de alguno de los cabecillas, de los tipos más característicos.

La voz de la princesa era baja y más bien profunda, pero hablaba en un tono perfectamente natural y sin darle importancia, como si quisiera decir que había muchas más maravillas de las que él podía imaginar. Su forma de hablar resultaba absolutamente nueva para Hyacinth. Su manera de pronunciar las palabras y de puntuar las frases eran la revelación de lo que él suponía la sociedad, la mismísima sociedad a cuya destrucción estaba orientado.

—Supongo que el capitán Sholto no creerá que yo soy uno de los cabecillas —exclamó Hyacinth, decidido a que no se rieran más de él, si podía evitarlo.

—Me dijo que era muy original.

—No lo sabe y, si me permite decirlo, no creo que usted lo sepa tampoco. ¿Cómo iba a saberlo? Soy uno de los muchos miles de jóvenes de mi clase (supongo que sí sabe lo que es *eso*) en cuyo cerebro está fermentando cierto tipo de ideas. Yo no tengo nada de original. Soy muy joven y muy ignorante; y hace sólo unos meses que he empezado a hablar de la posibilidad de una revolución social con hombres que han considerado el asunto mucho mejor de lo que yo podía hacerlo. No soy más que una partícula —resumió Hyacinth— en la gris inmensidad del pueblo. Sólo puedo alardear de mi buena fe y de mi gran deseo de que se haga justicia.

La princesa le escuchaba con toda atención, y su actitud le hacía darse cuenta de lo mal que se expresaba en comparación con una persona acostumbrada a conversar; le parecía que delataba un esfuerzo ridículo, que tartamudeaba y dejaba escapar toda suerte de vulgares sonidos.

Ella durante un momento permaneció callada, sólo mirándole con su deliciosa sonrisa:

—¡Ya veo cómo es! —exclamó por fin—. Para mí es mucho más interesante que si fuera una excepción.

Al oír esas palabras, Hyacinth vaciló un momento; se notó en que bajaba los ojos. Ya sabemos hasta qué punto se consideraba uno más del rebaño. La princesa también debió de notarlo porque en seguida añadió:

—Al mismo tiempo puedo ver que es de sobra notable.

—¿Por qué cree usted que soy notable?

—Bueno, tiene ideas generales.

—Hoy en día todo el mundo las tiene. Y en Bloomsbury las tienen en un grado subido. Tengo un amigo (que entiende de todo esto mucho más que yo) que pierde la paciencia con ellos: dice que son una estupidez y un peligro y que serán nuestra ruina. Unas cuantas ideas muy determinadas (si son las verdaderas) es lo que necesitamos.

—¿Quién es su amigo? —preguntó de sopetón la princesa.

—¡Christina, Christina! —murmuró *madame* Grandoni desde el otro lado del palco.

Christina no le hizo caso, y Hyacinth, sin comprender el aviso y acordándose de lo personales que son siempre las mujeres, contestó:

—Es un chico joven que vive en Camberwell y que está empleado en un almacén de medicamentos.

Si Hyacinth creía haber puesto en la descripción de su amigo una dosis más fuerte de la que la princesa podía digerir se había equivocado totalmente. Pareció extasiarse ante el cuadro que evocaban sus palabras, y preguntó inmediatamente si el joven también era listo y si tenía esperanzas de llegar a conocerle. ¿No le había visto el capitán Sholto? Y si le había visto, ¿por qué no había hablado también de él? Cuando Hyacinth contestó que probablemente le había visto pero que no creía que hubiera hablado con él, la princesa, con asombrosa naturalidad, preguntó a su visitante si no podría llevar algún día a esa persona para que la viera.

Hyacinth miró a *madame* Grandoni, pero la digna señora estaba dedicada a contemplar el teatro con la ayuda de unos impertinentes de mango dorado. Ya se había dado cuenta de que a la princesa Casamassima no le gustaban las frases inútiles, y tenía además el buen gusto de comprender que intentar por su parte hacerle algún cumplido a tan gran señora no era lo más indicado:

—No sé si querrá venir. Es un hombre del que no se puede responder en casos como éste.

—Eso me hace desear mucho más que venga. Pero usted sí vendrá, ¿eh?

El pobre Hyacinth murmuró algo sobre tan inesperado honor; después de todo tenía cierta herencia francesa, y se las arreglaba mejor que si sólo hubiera dispuesto de la otra lengua. Pero *madame* Grandoni, retirando los impertinentes, le quitó las palabras de la boca con una cariñosa exhortación:

—Vaya a verla, vaya a verla una o dos veces. Le tratará como a un ángel.

—Debe de pensar que soy muy especial —dijo la princesa con tristeza.

—No sé lo que pienso. Me llevaría mucho tiempo.

—Me gustaría que se fiara de mí… inspirarle confianza. Y no me refiero sólo a usted, a los otros que piensan como usted. Verían que puedo estar con ustedes… y llegar bastante lejos. Hace un momento yo respondía del capitán Sholto, pero ¿quién hay que pueda responder de mí?

Y su tristeza se transformó en una sonrisa que a Hyacinth le pareció lo más magnánimo y conmovedor que había visto en su vida.

—¡Yo no, hija mía, te lo aseguro! —exclamó *madame* Grandoni, con una carcajada que hizo que la gente de las butacas mirara hacia el palco.

Su humor era contagioso, y le dio a Hyacinth audacia suficiente para decir:

—¡Yo confiaría en *usted* si lo hiciera!

Claro que inmediatamente se dio cuenta de que era una forma de hablar que resultaba aún más familiar que si hubiera expresado su falta de confianza.

—Viene a ser lo mismo entonces —dijo la princesa—. Si no fuera una persona respetable no aparecería conmigo en público. Si me conociera mejor, comprendería qué es lo que me ha hecho volver mi atención hacia la cuestión social. Es una historia muy larga, y los detalles no le interesarían mucho, pero quizá algún día, si hablamos más, pueda ponerse un poco de mi parte. Lo digo en serio, ¿sabe?; no me divierto metiéndome en alguna cosa para echar luego a correr. Estoy convencida de que vivimos en un paraíso de idiotas y que el suelo se está moviendo debajo de nuestros pies.

—No es el suelo, hija, eres tú la que está dando volteretas —intervino *madame* Grandoni.

—Amiga mía, tú tienes la facultad de creer lo que te gusta creer. Yo tengo que creer lo que veo.

—Desea lanzarse a la revolución, dirigirla e iluminarla —dijo *madame* Grandoni a Hyacinth, hablando con imperturbable seriedad.

—Estoy seguro de que podría dirigirla como quisiera —respondió el chico transportado.

La dignidad con que acababa de hablar la princesa, y que parecía ocultar un temblor de pasión, le aceleraba el pulso y, aunque casi no sabía lo que deseaba decir —sus aspiraciones resultaban aún muy vagas—, su tono, su voz y su maravillosa cara demostraban que tenía el alma generosa.

Ella respondió a su vehemente declaración con una sonrisa seria y un movimiento triste de cabeza:

—No tengo semejantes pretensiones y mi vieja amiga se está riendo de mí. Claro que eso es muy fácil; porque, ¿puede haber algo más absurdo que el que una mujer con título, con diamantes, con coche, con criados y con lo que llaman posición sienta simpatía por la lucha que mantienen los de abajo por subir? «Déjalo todo y te creeremos», tenéis razón en decirlo. Estoy dispuesta a dejarlo en el momento en que sirva para ayudar a la causa; os aseguro que eso es lo menos difícil. No quiero enseñar, quiero aprender, y sobre todo quiero saber *à quoi m'en tenir*. ¿Estamos en vísperas de un gran cambio o no? Todo eso que está tomando fuerza a escondidas, a oscuras, de noche, en pequeños lugares ocultos, fuera de la vista de los gobiernos, la policía y esos imbéciles «hombres de Estado», que Dios guarde, ¿va a estallar una buena mañana y a pegarle fuego al mundo? ¿O sólo soltarán unos chisporroteos y se consumirá y malgastará en conspiraciones inútiles, en heroísmos que no sirven para nada, y en movimientos aislados y condenados a abortar? Yo quiero saber *à quoi m'en tenir* —repitió otra vez, mirando a su visitante con los ojos más brillantes que nunca, y como si el chico pudiera decírselo en aquel mismo momento. Euego, de repente, añadió en un tono completamente distinto—: Perdone, tengo idea de que sabe francés. ¿No fue el capitán Sholto quien me lo dijo?

—Lo conozco algo —respondió Hyacinth—. Tengo en las venas sangre francesa.

Le contempló como si le hubiera expuesto un problema conmovedor:

—Sí, ya veo que no es *le premier venu*. Pero dígame: ese amigo de que hablaba antes es farmacéutico, y usted… ¿en qué trabaja?

—No soy más que encuadernador.

—Eso tiene que ser maravilloso. A ver si me encuaderna a mí algún libro.

—Tendría que llevarlos al taller, y yo allí sólo puedo hacer el trabajo que me manden. Claro que podría hacerlo en casa —propuso Hyacinth con naturalidad.

—Sí, me gustaría más. ¿Y a qué llama usted en casa?

—Al sitio donde vivo, en la parte norte de Londres. Es una calle muy pequeña que nunca habrá oído nombrar.

—¿Cómo se llama?

—Lomax Place, para servir a usted —contestó riéndose.

La princesa pareció comprender su inocente alegría; no le importaba lo más mínimo que notara que le gustaba:

—No, creo que no la he oído nombrar. No conozco muy bien Londres. No he vivido aquí mucho tiempo. La mayor parte de mi vida la he pasado en el extranjero. Mi marido es extranjero, del sur de Italia. No vivimos siempre juntos. Y yo no tengo las costumbres de este país… ni de ninguna otra clase, ¿verdad? ¡Huy, este país! Hay mucho que decir sobre él y mucho que hacer también, como usted sabrá mejor que nadie. Pero quiero conocer Londres; me interesa más de lo que pueda decir… la enorme ciudad, llena de gente y de humo. Quiero decir el Londres de verdad, la gente con sus sufrimientos y pasiones; no Park Lane y Bond Street. Quizá pueda ayudarme, sería muy amable por su parte. Por eso quiero conocer a hombres así. Ya ve que si le he dado tanto la lata esta noche no ha sido en balde.

—Me gustaría muchísimo enseñarle todo lo que conozco. Pero no es mucho y, sobre todo, no es muy bonito —dijo Hyacinth.

—¿Con quién vive en Lomax Place? —preguntó de una forma un poco extraña y a modo de compensación.

—El capitán Sholto se despide de la señorita y vuelve para acá —anunció *madame* Grandoni, pasando revista al anfiteatro con su instrumento. La orquesta había estado tocando la obertura del próximo acto.

Hyacinth vaciló un poco:

—Vivo con una modista.

—¿Con una modista? ¿Quiere usted decir… quiere usted decir…? —La princesa no continuó.

—¿Quiere decir que es su mujer? —preguntó *madame* Grandoni, más valiente.

—A lo mejor le alquila unas habitaciones —sugirió la princesa.

—Pero ¿cuántas cree que tengo? Me lo alquila todo o, por lo menos, ha estado haciéndolo hasta ahora. Me ha criado ella; es la mujercita más buena del mundo.

—Más te valdría encargarle un vestido —intervino *madame* Grandoni.

—¿Y su familia dónde está? —continuó la princesa.

—No tengo familia.

—¿No tiene a nadie?

—Nadie. Nunca he tenido.

—Pero la sangre francesa de que hablaba y que yo puedo ver claramente en su cara (no tiene la expresión o la falta de expresión inglesa), tiene que haberle venido de alguien.

—Sí, de mi madre.

—¿Y ha muerto?

—Sí, hace mucho tiempo.

—Eso es una verdadera lástima, porque las madres francesas suelen representar mucho para sus hijos.

La princesa contemplaba su abanico, mientras lo abría y lo cerraba, y luego dijo:

—Bueno, entonces vendrá cualquier día. Ya lo arreglaremos.

Hyacinth comprendió que la única respuesta era una inclinación silenciosa de toda su persona, y se levantó de la silla. Mientras estaba allí, comprendiendo que ya había estado bastante tiempo, pero sin saber tampoco cómo marcharse, la princesa, con el abanico cerrado, puesto de punta sobre la rodilla y con las manos apoyadas en él, volvió hacia Hyacinth sus encantadores ojos y dijo:

—¿Cree que pronto ocurrirá algo?

—¿Qué va a ocurrir…?

—Que si habrá una crisis, si se harán sentir ustedes.

En la cara de aquella preciosa mujer, y para desconcierto suyo, había una expresión al mismo tiempo inspirada, tentadora y burlona, todo lo cual se unió para hacerle decir tontamente:

—Intentaré comprobarlo —como si le hubiera mandado ver si tenía ya el coche a la puerta.

—No sé de qué están hablando, pero ruego que no se prolongue una o dos horas. Quiero ver lo que le pasa a la «Perla» —interrumpió *madame* Grandoni.

—Recuerde lo que le dije: lo daría todo, todo. —Y la princesa se quedó mirándole. Luego tendió la mano, y esta vez sí que sabía por qué iba a cogerla.

Cuando dijo adiós a *madame* Grandoni, la vieja señora le dijo con un cómico suspiro:

—¡Bien, *es* respetable!

Y en el pasillo, cuando ya había cerrado la puerta del palco, se dio cuenta de que seguía repitiendo mecánicamente esas palabras «¡Es respetable!». Todavía las tenía en los labios cuando se encontró con el capitán Sholto, que volvió a ponerle la mano en el hombro y a sacudirle de aquella manera natural pero insinuante, para la que parecía tan bien dispuesto.

—Querido muchacho, has nacido con buena estrella.

—Nunca me lo había imaginado —respondió Hyacinth cambiando de color.

—¡Hombre! Pues, ¿qué es lo que quieres? Tienes la facultad, la preciosa facultad de despertar interés en las mujeres, ¡menudo interés!

—¿Sí?, pregunte a las del palco. Me he portado como un perfecto idiota —declaró Hyacinth, abrumado al ver las oportunidades que había perdido.

—No dirán eso. ¿Y la señorita de arriba?

—Sí —dijo Hyacinth muy serio—. ¿Qué hay?

—No quería hablar de nada que no fuera de ti. ¿Ya puedes imaginarte lo que me ha gustado?

—A mí tampoco me gusta, pero tengo que subir.

—Sí, está contando los minutos. ¡Una persona encantadora! —añadió el capitán Sholto y, cuando Hyacinth ya se alejaba, gritó—: No temas… Llegarás lejos.

Cuando el joven ocupó su puesto al lado de Millicent, en el anfiteatro, no le saludó ni le hizo ninguna pregunta sobre la aventura que había corrido en la parte más privilegiada de la sala. Se limitó a volver hacia él su linda cara durante algunos minutos y, como él tampoco tenía ganas de empezar la charla, el silencio se prolongó… se prolongó hasta alzarse el telón para el último acto. Era evidente que el ánimo de Millicent no estaba para seguir la obra y, en medio de una escena violenta, que incluía tiros y gritos, dijo por fin a su acompañante:

—Por lo que he sabido, tu princesa es de las buenas.

—¿Sí? Pues haz el favor de decirme lo que sabes.

—Sé lo que me ha contado ése.

—¿Y qué puede haberte contado?

—Pues que es una de las buenas. Hasta su marido ha tenido que echarla de casa.

Hyacinth recordó la alusión que la propia señora había hecho a propósito de su situación matrimonial; le hubiera gustado mucho decir a la señorita Henning que no creía ni una palabra. Estuvo dudando un momento, y dijo simplemente:

—Muy bien, no me importa.

—¿No te importa? ¡Pues a mí sí! —exclamó Millicent.

Y como resultaba imposible, en vista de la representación y de la celosa atención de los vecinos, continuar la conversación en un tono tan alto, después de estar cinco minutos mirando al escenario, se contentó con soltar en clave un poco más baja:

—¡Santo Dios, éste sí que es un bonito asunto!

Hyacinth se preguntaba si habría sido el capitán Sholto quien le había dado la fórmula.

XIV

No le dijo nada a Pinnie ni a mister Vetch de que había estado con una gran señora; pero sí que se lo dijo a Paul Muniment, a quien le confiaba muchísimas cosas. Al principio le tenía bastante miedo a aquel amigote del Norte, que daba muestras de cultivar la lógica y la crítica en un grado que no se prestaba a hablar libremente, pero más tarde descubrió que era un hombre al que se le podía contar cualquier cosa, con tal que no le importara a uno que la aprobara o la entendiera. Para ser revolucionario era un hombre tranquilísimo y tolerante a más no poder. La visión de las cosas que ansiaba cambiar no parecía tener el poder de irritarle y, si se burlaba de cosas que le afectaban mucho, lo hacía siempre sin acritud. Hyacinth pensaba a veces que de una manera demasiado inocente y pueril. Nuestro héroe admiraba su facultad de combinar la preocupación por las miserias de la humanidad con el estado de ánimo propio de un obrero joven y alegre, que se pone una camisa limpia el domingo por la mañana y, sin haber caído en la tentación de gastarse el jornal la noche antes, sopesa los atractivos que pueda ofrecer el pasar un día feliz en Epping Forest o en Gravesend. No hablaba nunca con mal humor de lo que le había tocado ni de su vida diaria; parecía que no se le hubiera ocurrido pensar que la «sociedad» era responsable del estado de la columna vertebral de su hermana, aunque Eustache Poupin y su mujer (que en realidad eran tan pacientes como él) hacían cuanto podían porque lo dijese, creyendo sin duda que iba a servirle de alivio. No parecían importarle nada las mujeres, hablaba de ellas pocas veces y siempre con respeto, y nunca había dado señales de tener novia, como no fuera que se considerase novia a *lady* Aurora Langrish. No probaba una gota de cerveza ni fumaba nunca; estaba siempre contento, de buen color, mirándolo todo con un aire inteligente e imperturbable, y hasta le había hecho a Hyacinth sentirse como un hermano mayor una vez que fueron al gallinero de seis peniques de Astley, a presenciar una pantomima ecuestre, al ver cómo se divertía y se quedaba con la boca abierta ante el poco selecto espectáculo. En una ocasión había tildado al encuadernador de golfillo sugestivo, pero Hyacinth le tenía entonces en tan alta opinión que casi le había parecido una patente de nobleza. Nuestro héroe sentía por él un entusiasmo ilimitado; había soñado siempre con una gran amistad, y no había encontrado nunca mejor oportunidad que aquella. No había nadie que pudiera albergar un sentimiento así con mayor nobleza que Hyacinth ni que fuera capaz de cultivar con más arte una relación personal e íntima. Algunas veces le desilusionaba ver que esa confianza no obtenía la debida respuesta; que, sobre algunos puntos importantes del programa socialista, Muniment no se definía con claridad, no había mostrado aún el *fond du sac*, como decía Eustache Poupin, a un admirador tan ardiente. Algunas cosas las contestaba con mucha libertad y, de cuando en cuando, de una manera que a Hyacinth le hacía pegar un bote, como el día que le preguntó qué pensaba de la pena capital y dijo que en lugar de aboliría la extendería a todos los que mentían o se emborrachaban habitualmente. Pero su amigo tenía siempre la sensación de que se reservaba la mejor carta y que incluso en el atento círculo de Bloomsbury, cuando sólo estaban presentes los hombres de fiar, había en su cabeza muchas conclusiones que no llegaba a expresar porque pensaba que ninguno de ellos merecía escucharlas. Así que en lugar de sospechar que tenía un programa muy pobre, Hyacinth creía que se le ocurrían cosas extraordinarias, que estaba pensándolas hasta llegar a una conclusión lógica, dondequiera que pudieran llevarle, y que el día que las soltara, con la puerta del club vigilada y todos los asistentes juramentados, iban a mirarse unos a otros y se iban a quedar pálidos y con la boca abierta.

—Quiere verte; me dijo que te llevara; lo decía muy en serio.

Hyacinth le contaba su entrevista con las señoras del palco, entrevista que, al pensar luego en ella, se le antojaba tan absurda como un sueño y con no muchas más probabilidades de continuar una vez despierto.

—¿Llevarme… llevarme adonde? —preguntó Muniment—. Hablas como si se tratara de una muestra de tu taller o de un perrito en venta. ¿Me ha visto alguna vez? ¿Cree que soy más bajo que tú? ¿Qué sabe de mí?

—Bueno, sabe que eres amigo mío… y eso le basta.

—¿Y crees que también ha de bastarme a mí que sea amiga tuya? No sé por qué me parece que vas a tener más de cuatro antes de terminar; muchas más de las que pueda contar. ¿Y cómo voy yo a ver a una hembra delicada con estas zarpas? —preguntó Muniment al tiempo que exhibía diez dedos manchados.

—Cómprate un par de guantes. —A Hyacinth le parecía un obstáculo muy serio, pero al cabo de un momento dijo—: No, es mejor que no lo hagas. Lo que le gusta son las manos sucias.

—¡Por Dios, pues eso es bien fácil! No necesita mandarme a buscar. Pero ¿no crees que te está tomando el pelo?

—Es muy posible, pero no veo qué podrá sacar de eso.

—A los peces gordos no tienes que molestarte en buscarles excusas. Su maldita riqueza engendra el mal y toda clase de deseos indecentes. Son capaces de hacer daño por el gusto de hacerlo. Además, ¿es sincera?

—Si no lo es, ¿para qué sirven todas tus explicaciones? —preguntó Hyacinth.

—No importa nada: de noche todos los gatos son pardos. Sea lo que sea, es un espantajo que no tiene nada que hacer y se dedica a burlarse. A lo mejor es una sinvergüenza.

—Si la hubieras visto no hablarías así.

—¡Dios me libre de verla si va a corromperme!

—¿Te parece que me corromperá a mí? —preguntó Hyacinth, con una cara y un tono de voz que hizo a su amigo estallar de risa.

—¿Cómo va a corromperte si no eres ya más que un montoncillo de corrupción?

—Eso no lo crees. —Hyacinth se puso muy serio.

—¿Quieres decir que si lo creyera no iba a decírtelo? ¿No te has dado cuenta de que digo lo que pienso?

—No, no dices ni la mitad de lo que piensas. Eres más escurridizo que un pez.

Paul Muniment le miró, como si le hubiera gustado la agudeza de la observación:

—Bueno, si te dijera la otra mitad de lo que opino sobre ti, ¿crees que la entenderías?

—Voy a ahorrarte la molestia. Soy un joven muy listo, responsable y prometedor, y cualquiera se sentiría orgulloso de tenerme por amigo.

—¿Es eso lo que te ha dicho tu princesa? ¡Tiene que ser un verdadero hallazgo! —exclamó Paul—. ¿Y no te registró el bolsillo mientras lo hacía?

—¡Sí, claro! A los pocos minutos eché de menos una pitillera de plata con las armas de los Robinson. Y ahora, hablando en serio —dijo Hyacinth—, ¿no te parece posible que una mujer de esa clase quiera enterarse de lo que sucede entre los que son como nosotros?

—Depende de la clase que digas.

—Pues una mujer con un montón de alhajas y perfumes maravillosos y con las maneras de un ángel. A veces me pregunto si las chicas de las perfumerías tienen las mismas maneras; pero, claro, lo que no pueden tener son las perlas. Desde luego que ese interés es raro, pero no es inconcebible, ¿por qué iba a serlo? Puede haber personas que no sean egoístas, sentimientos desinteresados.

—Y también puede haber señoras que estén temblando por sus joyas y hasta por sus maneras. En serio, como tú dices, es perfectamente concebible. No me sorprende lo más mínimo que la aristocracia sienta una gran curiosidad por lo que estamos preparando y quiera meter las narices en ello. Yo, en su lugar, no estaría muy tranquilo y, si fuera una mujer de maneras angelicales, es probable que me alegrara muchísimo de echarle mano a un encuadernador suavecito y susceptible y le sacara al pobre todo lo que pudiera.

—¿Tienes miedo de que le cuente algún secreto? —exclamó Hyacinth, enrojeciendo de indignación.

—¿Secreto? Pero ¿qué secreto puedes contarle, hijo mío?

Hyacinth se volvió:

—No tienes confianza en mí; nunca la has tenido.

—Ya lo haremos algún día, no tengas miedo —dijo Muniment, que no quería ser duro, al menos con Hyacinth, cosa que le parecía imposible—. Y cuando lo hagamos, llorarás de desilusión.

—Bueno, tú no —contestó Hyacinth.

Luego preguntó a su amigo si creía que la princesa Casamassima era la espía número uno —el diablo mismo tenía que ser— y por qué, en ese caso, Sholto no lo era, ya que no sospecharían de él cuando le habían dejado entrar y salir. Muniment no sabía siquiera a quién se refería, pues no había tenido relación con el caballero, pero pudo hacerse una idea bastante completa después de oír la descripción del capitán. Se limitó a decir, con su habitual buen humor, que le tenía simplemente por un borrico y que, aunque hubiera conseguido meterse allí con intención de traicionarlos, ¿qué palanca iba a poder agarrar, qué podía hacer contra ellos por lo que había visto u oído? Si tenía el capricho de ir a meterse en los clubs de obreros (Paul recordaba la primera noche que llegó; le había llevado aquel ebanista alemán que iba siempre con el cuello

vendado y fumaba en una pipa con cazoleta del tamaño de una estufa); si le divertía ponerse un sombrero viejo, fumar tabaco malo y llamar a sus «inferiores» «querido muchacho»; si creía que al hacerlo podía formarse una idea de cómo era el pueblo, adelantar la mitad del camino y prepararse para lo que pudiera venir, todo eso era asunto suyo y le daba la bienvenida, aunque hacía falta ser muy zoquete para dedicarse a pasar la noche en un agujero como aquel, cuando podía pasarlo estupendamente en uno de esos establecimientos de Pall Mall llenos de sillones y de fieles servidores. Después de todo, ¿qué había visto en Bloomsbury? Pues una «reunión social» bien idiota, en la que había pipas de arcilla, un suelo de arena, menos de la mitad del gas necesario y unos cuantos periódicos, y donde los asistentes, como podía verse, eran radicales avanzados y, en su mayoría, aventajados idiotas. Podía darles palmaditas en la espalda y decir que la Cámara de los Lores no duraría ni hasta el verano, pero ¿qué descubrimientos podía hacer? Estaba a la misma altura que la princesa de Hyacinth; andaba nervioso y escamado y creía que debía tomar precauciones.

—No es como la princesa. Estoy seguro de que es muy distinto —exclamó Hyacinth.

—Claro que es distinto; ella supongo que es una mujer guapa, y él es un hombre feo; pero no creo que ninguno de los dos vaya a salvarnos o echarnos a perder. Su curiosidad es natural, pero yo tengo más cosas que hacer que exhibirlos, así que dile a tu Alteza Serenísima que le quedo muy agradecido.

Hyacinth reflexionó un momento y dijo:

—Pues a *lady* Aurora sí que se lo enseñas; parece que quieras darle la información que desee. ¿Dónde ves la diferencia? Si ella hace bien en interesarse, ¿por qué no puede hacerlo mi princesa?

—Si ya es tuya, ¿qué más puede desear? —preguntó Muniment—. Todo lo que sé de *lady* Aurora y lo único que me importa es que va a estar con Rosy y que le lleva té y la atiende. Si la princesa hiciera lo mismo vería qué podía yo hacer, pero aparte de eso no voy a tomarme el más mínimo interés en su atracción por las masas o por esta masa particular. —Y Paul, con su descolorido dedo gordo, señaló su propia humanidad.

El tono que había empleado desilusionó a Hyacinth, a quien sorprendía que no encontrara algo más notable y romántico el incidente del teatro. Parecía darse por contento con la explicación de su amigo; pero, cuando poco después, al referirse a la misteriosa señora, dijo que estaba «temblando», el crítico saltó:

—¡Eso sí que no, no tiene miedo de nada!

—¡Ay, chico, a ti sí que no te tiene miedo!

Hyacinth no hizo caso de semejante salida, pero preguntó con una candidez que le libraba de todo ridículo:

—¿Crees que podría hacerme algún daño si sigo adelante con su amistad?

—Sí, es muy probable, pero tú tienes que devolvérselo, y bien. Eso es lo que tienes que hacer, ¿sabes?, sacar lo que puedas, vivir tu vida y dar gusto al «sexo». Yo soy un animal feo y tiznado, tengo que cuidarme del fogón y de la tienda; pero tú eres uno de esos chiquillos que *tienen* que correr y ver mundo. Debías ser un adorno de la sociedad, lo mismo que un galán en un libro de cuentos. Pero hay una cosa: si te hace mucho daño, tendrá que vérselas conmigo.

Hyacinth, desde hacía tiempo, pensaba llevar a Pinnie a ver a la postrada damisela de Audley Court, a quien había prometido que su benefactora (le había dicho a Rosy que era su madrina, le sonaba mejor) cumpliría con esa ceremonia. Pero el asunto había ido retrasándose por las pequeñas dudas de la modista, que ya no podía imaginar que quedara en Londres alguien tan desamparado que quisiera verla. Había perdido toda curiosidad y sabía que no podía hacer en público el mismo papel que cuando su dominio de la moda le permitía ilustrarla sobre su propia persona, con ayuda de no pocas ballenas. Además, se daba cuenta de que Hyacinth tenía unos amigos muy raros y unas opiniones más raras todavía; sospechaba que se interesaba por la política más de lo natural, y que no acababa de estar del lado derecho, por poco que ella entendiera de causas y partidos; y tenía la vaga idea de que tales desviaciones sólo servían para aumentar los trabajos de los pobres que, de acuerdo con unas teorías que nunca había meditado, pero que tenía tan arraigadas como la religión, debían pensar siempre igual que los ricos. Ya se diferenciaban bastante de ellos por su pobreza para ir a buscar otras diferencias. El día en que por fin acompañó a Hyacinth a Camberwell, un sábado por la tarde, en pleno verano, lo hizo entre suspiros y como si no hubiera otro remedio; pero, de haber dicho que lo deseaba, habría ido con él a casa de un basurero. El peligro de no encontrar a Rose Muniment en casa no era mayor que el de que los leones de bronce de Trafalgar Square fueran a darse un paseo hacia Whitehall; pero había avisado con tiempo y, cuando abrió la puerta al oír que le llamaban desde dentro, vio que había tenido la feliz idea de avisar a *lady* Aurora para que le ayudase a recibir a *miss* Pynsent. Eso fue al menos lo que se imaginó al ver alzarse ante él la memorable figura de su señoría, a quien no había vuelto a encontrar desde que se conocieron allí. Presentó su compañera a su yacente

anfitriona, y Rosy repitió luego su nombre ante la representante de Belgrave Square. Pinnie se inclinó hasta el suelo cuando *lady* Aurora le tendió la mano, y se deslizó sin ruido hasta una silla junto a la cama. *Lady* Aurora reía y se agitaba amistosa y alegremente, pero más bien sin ton ni son, y Hyacinth se dio cuenta de que no se acordaba de él. Su atención, si embargo, estaba dedicada sobre todo a Pinnie: la contemplaba con sumo interés, para ver si en tan solemne ocasión sacaba a relucir aquella cortesía tiesa y anticuada cuyo secreto poseía, y que le hacía compararla, por su forma de extraer el sentido de las cosas, a unas pinzas de plata para coger terrones de azúcar. Deseaba que Pinnie hiciera buen papel, no sólo por ella, sino por sí mismo, y esperaba que no perdiera la cabeza si a Rosy le daba por hablar de Inglefield. Era evidente que Rosy le había impresionado mucho, y no hacía más que repetir en voz baja: «hija mía, hija mía», mientras la mujercita de la cama explicaba que nada le hubiera gustado tanto como seguir su preciosa profesión, pero que no podía estar sentada, y que la única vez que había cogido una aguja en su vida se le había caído entre las sábanas y se había metido en el colchón, por lo que siempre temía que volviera a salir y la pinchara, cosa que hasta entonces no había ocurrido ni quizá llegara a ocurrir, pues se movía tan poco que no podía empujarla.

—A lo mejor cree que el pañuelito que llevo al cuello me lo he hecho yo misma —dijo Rosy—, le parecerá que estando tanto tiempo aquí quieta es lo menos que podía hacer. Pues no he dado ni una puntada. En eso soy la señora más fina de Londres; no muevo ni un dedo. Es un regalo de su señoría, lo ha hecho ella misma. ¿Qué le parece? ¿Ha visto usted a otra persona tan privilegiada? Y mire la labor, haga el favor de mirarla, y dígame qué le parece.

La chica se quitó el pañuelo del cuello y se lo lanzó a Pinnie, que estaba un poco cortada y no dejaba de repetir «hija mía, hija mía», en parte por simpatía, y en parte porque, a pesar de la consideración debida a todo el mundo, le parecía un proceder más bien extraño.

—Está muy mal hecho; ya lo verá usted —dijo *lady* Aurora—. No fue más que una broma.

—Sí, todo es una broma, todo menos mi estado de salud. Eso se admite que es serio. Cuando su señoría me envía carbón por valor de cinco chelines es una broma; y cuando me trae una botella de oporto de la mejor calidad es otra broma; y cuando sube sesenta y siete escalones (hay sesenta y siete, lo sé muy bien aunque no suba ni baje) para pasar la tarde conmigo en plena temporada de verano de Londres, entonces la broma es más grande. Sé todo lo que hay que saber sobre la temporada de verano, aunque yo no me marche nunca, y comprendo lo que se pierde su señoría. Es muy bromista, sí, pero por suerte yo sé cómo tomarlo. Ya ve usted que no me serviría de nada ser quisquillosa, ¿verdad, *miss* Pynsent?

—Hija mía, hija mía, me gustaría hacerle algo yo misma; sería mejor… sería mejor —balbució la pobre Pinnie.

—Sería mejor que mi trabajo. Yo no tengo ni idea de cómo se hacen esas cosas —dijo *lady* Aurora.

—¡Por Dios, mi *lady*!, no he querido decir eso; quise decir que sería más conveniente. Cualquier cosa que pueda antojársele —añadió la modista, como si se tratara del apetito de la inválida.

—Bueno, ya ve que yo no llevo nada, sólo una chaqueta de franela para estar un poco mejor —contestó Rosy—. A lo que me dedico es a las colchas elegantes, como puede verse —y extendió las manos sobre la colcha de vivos colores—. ¿No le parece, *miss* Pynsent, que podría ser también una de las bromas de su señoría?

—Pero, querida amiga, ¿cómo puede decir esas cosas? ¡Yo nunca he llegado a tanto! —interrumpió *lady* Aurora con ansiedad.

—Bueno, como me ha dado casi todo lo que tengo, a veces se me olvida. No me costó más que seis peniques, así que viene a ser lo mismo que si hubiera sido un regalo. Sí, seis peniques en la tómbola de un bazar de Hackney, una rifa a beneficio de la capilla metodista, hace tres años. Un chico que trabaja con mi hermano y que vive por allí le ofreció un par de boletos, y cogimos uno cada uno. Cuando digo «cogimos», quiero decir cogió. ¿Cómo iba a encontrar yo (es decir él) una moneda de seis peniques en esa copa de la chimenea si no la hubiera metido antes? Mi boleto resultó premiado y, como vivo en la cama, el premio fue una colcha hecha con todos los colores del arco iris. ¡No ha habido nadie con tanta suerte como yo!

Y la chica, mientras charlaba, dirigía alegres miradas a Hyacinth, para ver si le ponía de mal humor con su contradictorio optimismo.

—Es preciosa, pero si quiere otra, por variar, yo tengo muchísimos retales —dijo Pinnie, con una generosidad que le hizo pensar a Hyacinth que estaba quedando muy bien.

Rose Muniment puso la mano sobre el brazo de la modista y contestó:

—No, no hace falta cambiar, no hace falta cambiar. ¿Cómo puede haber cambios donde ya está todo? Aquí está todo, todos los colores que se han visto, inventado o soñado desde el principio del mundo —y con la otra mano acariciaba su colcha multicolor—. Usted tiene muchos retazos, pero no puede tener tantos

como los que hay aquí. Cuantos más trozos casara, más se parecería la colcha a esa vieja y deslumbrante amiga mía. Tengo otra idea, una idea maravillosa, y quizá su señoría puede adivinar lo que es —Rosy tenía la mano en el brazo de la modista, y miraba alternativamente a sus dos compañeras, como si quisiera asociarlas y fundir lo más posible el interés de ambas hacia ella—. A propósito de lo que estábamos diciendo hace unos minutos… ¿podría su señoría seguir un poquito más?

Como *lady* Aurora parecía desconcertada, más bien inquieta y azorada al verse requerida para responder a un acertijo en público, la enferma acudió en su ayuda:

—Sorprenderá al principio, pero no cuando yo lo haya explicado: lo que quiero es sencillamente una barita rosa.

—¡Una barita rosa! —repitió *lady* Aurora.

—Con un ribete negro. ¿No entiende la relación con lo que estábamos hablando antes de que llegaran nuestros visitantes?

—Sí, sería muy bonita —dijo Pinnie—. Yo las hacía así en mis buenos tiempos; o también de un color azul bien escogido y con el ribete blanco.

—No, rosa y negro, rosa y negro… para que haga juego con mi cutis. A lo mejor no sabían que tengo cutis; pero son muy pocas cosas las que me faltan. Usted tuvo la amabilidad de decir que lo que se me antojara. Bueno, pues lo que se me antoja es eso. Ahora su señoría ve la relación que hay, ¿no?

Lady Aurora parecía perdida, como si comprendiera que tenía que verlo, pero sin estar segura de que continuaba sin ver nada y, al mismo tiempo, preocupada por la idea de que aquella evocación repentina fuera en detrimento del bolsillo de la modista.

—Sí, una bata rosa iría muy bien, y *miss* Pynsent sería muy amable —dijo.

Hyacinth, por su parte, pensaba que el encargo era un poquito caro, pues Pinnie tendría que poner la tela y la labor. Sin embargo, la amistosa frescura con que la enferma la hacía contribuir no le parecía fuera de lugar, pues pensaba que, después de todo, cuando uno tiene que pasarse la vida tumbado, también tiene derecho a alargar la mano (no será mucho lo que pueda alcanzar) y agarrar lo que caiga.

Pinnie declaró que sabía perfectamente qué era lo que deseaba la señorita Muniment, y que se comprometía a hacer un verdadero primor; y Rosy dijo que tenía que explicar para qué servía, pero que necesitaban acertar una adivinanza otra vez. Se la propondría a *miss* Pynsent y a Hyacinth todas las veces que quisieran: ¿de qué habían estado hablando *lady* Aurora y ella antes de que vinieran? Juntó las manos y le brillaban los ojos de impaciencia mientras los volvía hacia *lady* Aurora y la modista. ¿Qué les parecería natural, delicioso, magnífico… si conseguían encontrar un sitio donde ponerlo? Hyacinth sugirió sucesivamente una jaula con gorriones de Java, una caja de música, una ducha, o quizá un retrato de su señoría de cuerpo entero, y Pinnie le echó una ojeada, temerosa de que llevara la broma demasiado lejos. Rosy, por fin, alivió su expectación y dijo:

—¡Un sofá! Ni más ni menos que un sofá. ¿Qué les parece? ¿Imaginan que esa idea podía haber salido de alguien que no fuera su señoría? Hay que atribuir todo el mérito a ella; se le ocurrió cuando estábamos hablando. Yo creo que estábamos comentando ese dolor especial que se siente debajo de las paletillas cuando uno no se mueve nunca. Lo dijo lo mismo que podía haber hablado del masaje apropiado —los hay muy inapropiados— o de una cucharada de ese mejunje americano. Lo estamos pensando, y uno de estos días, si dedicamos tiempo suficiente al asunto, le encontraremos sitio, el más bonito y cómodo que pueda haber. Espero que vea usted ahora la relación que tiene con la bata rosa —dijo a Pinnie— y espero que comprenda también la importancia de la pregunta: «¿Hay que quitar algo?». Me gustaría que mirara un poco alrededor y me dijera qué contestaría si yo le preguntara *¿puede* quitarse algo?

XV

—Desde luego, no hay nada de lo que yo quisiera desprenderme —contestó Pinnie, contemplando la habitación.

Lady Aurora, discretamente, y para facilitar la tarea de Amanda, se levantó y fue a la ventana, abierta a la tarde de verano y que todavía dejaba pasar las últimas luces de un largo día. Hyacinth, poco después, se colocó junto a ella y se puso a mirar la multitud de chimeneas oscuras y las pequeñas casas renegridas cubiertas de tejas mugrientas. El aire pesado del mes de julio en Londres flotaba ante ellos, cubierto por el eterno ruido de la ciudad, que parecía aquietarse y desaparecer en algunos momentos, pero volvía a transformarse en una voz poderosa en cuanto se le prestaba oído. Aquí y allá, en pobres ventanas, brillaba una luz mortecina, y arriba, en una zona más limpia de humos, desde un cielo todavía luminoso, se asomaba una estrella débil y plateada. Era el mismo cielo que cubría a lo lejos la tierra y se extendía sobre campos dorados, colinas rojizas y jardines donde cantaban los ruiseñores; pero visto desde aquel sitio todo resultaba feo y sórdido, y parecía expresar o representar el cansancio del trabajo agotador. De repente, con gran sorpresa de Hyacinth, *lady* Aurora comentó:

—No ha llegado a buscar los libros.

—¿Aquellos que me ofreció tan amablemente? Creí que no habíamos quedado en nada.

Soltó una risita forzada:

—Ya los he escogido; están preparados.

—Muy amable por su parte —se apresuró a decir el chico—. Cualquier día iré y los recogeré con mucho gusto. —No estaba muy seguro de ir, pero era lo menos que podía contestar.

—Ella le dirá dónde vivo, ¿sabe? —*lady* Aurora indicó con un movimiento de cabeza la dirección de la cama, como si fuera demasiado tímida para decirlo ella misma.

—¡Huy! No me cabe duda de que sabe el camino, podría decirme todas las calles y todos los recovecos.

—Me ha hecho contarle muchas veces cómo voy y vengo —confirmó su acompañante—. Creo que habrá pocas personas que conozcan Londres mejor que ella. Nunca olvida nada.

—Es una brujilla maravillosa… a mí me aterra —confesó Hyacinth.

Lady Aurora volvió hacia él sus pudorosos ojos:

—¡Es tan buena, tan paciente!

—Sí, y parece imposible que esté enterada de todo y sepa tantas cosas.

—Es que es extraordinariamente lista —dijo su señoría—. ¿Quién cree que es el más listo?

—¿El más listo?

—¿La chica o su hermano?

—¡Huy! Yo creo que a él cualquier día le harán primer ministro de Inglaterra.

—¿De verdad? ¡Cuánto me alegro! —exclamó, poniéndose coloradísima—. Me alegro de que lo crea posible. Ya sabe que así debía ser si las cosas marcharan como es debido.

Hyacinth no había confesado la gran fe que tenía en su amigo para tomarle el pelo a su señoría; pero, al ver que lo tomaba tan en serio, fue como si lo estuviera haciendo. A pesar de todo, no dijo más que lo que creía cuando habló de sus grandes esperanzas sobre el futuro de Paul Muniment: estaba seguro de que el mundo oiría hablar de él, de que Inglaterra le necesitaba y de que el público le aclamaría algún día. Era imposible conocerle sin comprender que era un hombre muy fuerte y que estaba destinado a un gran papel.

—Sí, no lo creerían, no lo creerían.

Estaba completamente de acuerdo y Hyacinth podía ver lo que le complacía oír. Él disfrutaba también exponiendo la opinión que tenía de su amigo; le parecía que se volvía más clara, que alcanzaba la fuerza de una invocación o una profecía. Lo notaba más que nunca al preguntarse qué había llevado a la naturaleza a dotar a Paul Muniment de tan extraordinarias facultades de espíritu (y de cuerpo también, porque era

fuerte como un caballo) si no le destinaba a hacer algo grandioso en favor de sus semejantes. Hyacinth confesó a su señoría que creía que la gente de su clase era generalmente muy estúpida, lo que él calificaría de cabezas de tercer orden. Habría deseado que no fuera así, pues bien sabía Dios que los apreciaba y que sólo pedía correr su misma suerte; pero tenía que reconocer que siglos de pobreza, de trabajo mal pagado, de mala e insuficiente comida y de miserable alojamiento no habían tenido un efecto beneficioso sobre sus mejores facultades. Por eso, cuando aparecía una excepción tan espléndida como la de su amigo, la fuerza que necesitaba era mucho mayor, porque era también mucho lo que necesitaba hacer para compensarlo. Hyacinth volvió a decir que en el bajo nivel de vida que le correspondía, la gente carecía de la facultad de pensar: su cerebro se había simplificado, había quedado reducido a dos o tres elementos. Comprendía que esos juicios desazonaban a su compañera; se revolvía, se contorsionaba ligeramente como si quisiera protestar, pero era demasiado considerada para interrumpirle. Él no deseaba molestarla, pero había veces que no podía resistir la perversa satisfacción de insistir en la bajeza de su estado, de hurgar con el cuchillo en la herida que había hecho al aludir a él, y dejar bien claro que si el lugar que ocupaba en el mundo era ínfimo, al menos no se forjaba ilusiones sobre sí mismo ni sobre los de su especie. *Lady* Aurora se apresuró a decir que sabía mucho de los pobres; pero no los pobres como Rosy, sino los de la pobreza espantosa y sin esperanza, con los que tenía una familiaridad mayor de lo que Hyacinth podía imaginar, y que muchas veces se veía sorprendida por el talento y el rápido ingenio que tenían y por su dominio de la conversación, que resultaba mucho más interesante que la que se escuchaba en los salones. Con frecuencia los encontraba listísimos.

Hyacinth sonrió y dijo:

—¡Ah, bueno!, es que cuando se llega a las profundidades más hondas de la pobreza pueden resultar interesantes y extraños otra vez. Pero temo que yo no he bajado tanto. A pesar de mis oportunidades, son pocos los pobres de solemnidad que conozco.

—Yo conozco a muchísimos —*lady* Aurora vaciló, como si no le gustara jactarse, pero acabó diciéndolo —. Me atrevería a decir que conozco más pobres que nadie.

Hyacinth hallaba algo conmovedor y hermoso en aquella pretensión tímida y sencilla: confirmaba su idea de que de alguna manera, misteriosa, incongruente y hasta un poquito cómica, era una verdadera heroína, una criatura con ideales nobles.

Quizá se diera cuenta de que estaba a punto de pensar algo que fuese favorable a ella y, como no había nada que le diera más miedo que el peligro de escuchar un cumplido, dijo:

—Encuentro que su tía es muy simpática, y estoy segura de que Rosy también lo cree así.

Volvió a ruborizarse casi antes de terminar de hablar; parecía temer que pudiera imaginarse que deseaba contradecirle al presentar el caso de su tía como una prueba de que la clase más baja, aunque fuera en un prosaico nivel superior, no dejaba de tener puntos estimables. No había nada que asegurase que no era ésa su intención; por eso, sin querer dejarle pasar nada, respondió:

—¿Quiere decir que es una excepción a lo que estaba diciendo?

Tartamudeó un poco; pero, al ver que él no le ahorraba nada, no quiso ahorrárselo tampoco:

—Sí, y usted también es una excepción; no va a hacerme creer que le falta inteligencia. Los Muniment no lo creen así.

—Ni yo tampoco; pero eso no prueba que las excepciones no son frecuentes. Yo tengo en mis venas sangre que no es la del pueblo.

—¡Ah! Comprendo —dijo *lady* Aurora amablemente, y añadió con una sonrisa—: entonces es usted una excepción todavía mayor… en la clase alta.

Su forma de tomarlo no podía ser mejor, pero no bastaba para hacer olvidar a Hyacinth que desde su punto de vista había estado muy indiscreto. Un momento antes creía que estaba asegurado frente a la tentación de aludir a los misterios de su ascendencia, especialmente porque si lo hacía con jactancia (y no deseaba por el momento convertirlo en un ejercicio de humildad), la más pequeña alusión podía resultar grotesca. No había vuelto a abrir la boca para hablar de su nacimiento con nadie desde los terribles días en que el asunto se discutió en Lomax Place, ante la presencia de mister Vetch; ni siquiera con Paul Muniment, ni con Millicent Henning ni con Eustache Poupin. Tenía la impresión de que la gente pensaba varias cosas sobre él, y conocía las que pensaba la señorita Henning: eran de tal naturaleza que se preguntaba a veces si los lazos que le unían a ella no eran, por parte de la chica, una determinación secreta de satisfacer en todo lo posible su curiosidad antes de terminar con él. Presumía de ser impenetrable, y se había puesto a alardear de la manera más idiota ante la primera tentación que se le había presentado. Se puso colorado como un tomate nada más terminar de hablar, en parte ante la imagen de lo que podía alardear, y en parte ante lo absurdo de un reto del modelo de educación que tenía delante. Esperaba que no se fijase demasiado

en lo que había dicho, y realmente ella no dio síntoma alguno de asombrarse al ver que pretendía tener un linaje; era demasiado delicada para hacerlo y sólo pareció notar las señales de confusión que siguieron. En cuanto le fue posible, se dio a sí mismo una lección de humildad al comentar:

—Comprendo que pasa gran parte del tiempo entre los pobres, y estoy seguro de que se gana muchas bendiciones. Pero confieso francamente que no entiendo que una señora se entregue a gentes como nosotros cuando no está obligada a hacerlo. Debemos ser muy triste compañía cuando hay tantas cosas mejores.

—Me gusta muchísimo… no lo comprende.

—No, claro, eso es precisamente lo que digo. Nuestra pobre amiga de la cama se pasa la vida hablando de su casa, de su familia, de sus magnificencias, de sus jardines y de sus invernaderos. Deben de ser maravillosos…

—Sí, desearía que no lo hiciera; realmente desearía que no lo hiciera. ¡Le hace sentirse a una espantosamente mal! —le interrumpió con vehemencia *lady* Aurora.

—¡Bah!, pero sería mejor que la dejase, a ella le encanta.

—Sí, mucho más que a cualquiera de nosotros —suspiró *lady* Aurora impotente.

—Bien, ¿y cómo puede dejar todas esas cosas bonitas para venir aquí a respirar este aire asqueroso, rodearse de imágenes horrendas y estar con gente cuyo menor defecto es ser ignorante, brutal y sucia? Y no lo digo por las señoras aquí presentes —añadió Hyacinth, con aquel estilo que Millicent Henning admiraba y odiaba a la vez y que era lo que menos comprendía de dónde podía venirle.

—Desearía hacérselo entender —suspiró *lady* Aurora, con ojos turbados y suplicantes, como si le resultara una desilusión.

—Pero cuando ya se ha dicho todo, creo que sí que lo entiendo. La caridad está en su naturaleza, es una especie de pasión.

—¡Sí, sí, es una especie de pasión! —repitió su señoría, con vehemencia y muy agradecida a esa palabra —. Yo no sé si es caridad, no es eso lo que pienso. Pero sea lo que sea, es una pasión… es mi vida, es lo único que me importa.

Hablaba con dificultad, como si pudiera haber algo indecoroso en la confesión o no estuviera segura del que escuchaba; pero luego fue dominándose ante el deseo de justificar una excentricidad que había llamado la atención, y por el gusto de descargar su alma de tanto como había acumulado:

—Cuando tenía quince años quería venderlo todo y dárselo a los pobres. Y desde entonces siempre he querido hacer algo; creo que me estallaría el corazón si no pudiera hacerlo.

Hyacinth se sentía dominado por un gran respeto, que sin embargo no le impidió decir, si bien con palabras que a él mismo le sonaban condescendientes:

—Supongo que es usted muy religiosa.

Ella miró hacia la oscuridad que iba en aumento fuera, a los techos mugrientos de las casas y la emanación borrosa de las farolas de las calles:

—No sé. Cada uno tiene sus ideas. Algunas de ellas pueden resultar extrañas. Creo que hay muchos sacerdotes que hacen mucho bien, pero otros no me gustan en absoluto. Yo diría que en casa hemos tenido siempre demasiados; mi padre les tiene una gran afición. Creo haber conocido demasiados obispos, he tenido a la Iglesia demasiado encima. Me atrevería a decir que en casa no piensan que una es lo que debiera ser; claro que me consideran muy rara en todos los aspectos, y no hay duda de que lo soy. Le diría que no se lo cuento todo porque, ¿de qué sirve hacerlo cuando la gente no comprende? En casa somos doce, y ocho de nosotras chicas; y si usted piensa que eso es estupendo, como lo piensa *ella*, invitaría a los dos a hacer la prueba durante un rato. Mi padre no es rico, y sólo una de nosotras, Eve, está casada, y no tenemos nada de guapas, y… ¡huy, hay tantas cosas! —exclamó, mirando alrededor al ver que estaba lanzada—. No me gusta la sociedad ni le gustaría a usted si viera la clase de sociedad que hay en Londres, al menos en algunos sitios. No podría imaginarse la cantidad de embustes y de pesadeces que tiene uno que aguantar. Pero yo me he librado ya; hago lo que quiero, aunque ha sido una verdadera lucha. Tengo libertad, y ésa es la mayor bendición de este mundo si exceptuamos la fama de ser rara y hasta de estar un poco loca, que es una ventaja todavía mayor. Estoy un poco loca, ¿sabe?, no debe extrañarse si lo oye decir. Es porque me quedo en Londres cuando ellos se van al campo; todo el otoño, todo el invierno, cuando aquí no queda nadie (salvo tres o cuatro millones) y la lluvia cae, cae, cae y escurre de los árboles en el enorme y aburrido parque donde vive mi gente. Yo creo que no debería decir estas cosas, pero soy una verdadera lunática, y también puedo permitirme parecerlo. Cuando se es una entre ocho hermanas, y hay poco dinero (al menos para cada una), y no se tiene nada que hacer más que salir con otras tres o cuatro, y con impermeables, es muy fácil perder la cabeza. Claro que también está el pueblo, que no es nada bonito, y la gente a quien atender, y Dios sabe si necesitan que los atiendan; pero se debe trabajar con la parroquia, y en la parroquia

hay otras cuatro hijas más, todas solteras, y es triste y horrendo y se acaba harta, porque no entienden lo que una piensa ni lo que siente, ni una sola palabra de lo que se les diga. Además, tengo que admitir que los pobres de los pueblos son tontos; son muy negados. Prefiero Camberwell.

Lady Aurora sonrió y tomó aliento al terminar aquella arenga nerviosa, apresurada, casi incoherente, que había soltado jadeando, con entonaciones y contorsiones extrañas, como temiendo arrepentirse de un momento a otro, y no por la confidencia, sino por su egoísmo.

Para Hyacinth la había puesto bajo una luz inesperada, que le hacía ver que su extravagante y aristocrática soltería era una tapadera de pasiones tumultuosas. Nadie podía dar menos la impresión de estar animada por una ironía vengativa, pero veía que aquella criatura timorata y escrupulosa, aunque generosísima, no iba a pasar por alto la ocasión de azuzar a las instituciones entre las que se había criado y contra las que había reaccionado tan violentamente. Siempre había creído que un reaccionario era alguien que se desviaba de la fe liberal, pero la incondicional de Rosy le prestaba un nuevo valor al término; parecía que lo que le había llevado a sus presentes excesos fueran el párroco, el hacendado y las virtudes conservadoras de aquel hogar británico de clase alta que nuestro joven había tenido siempre como el mejor fruto de la civilización. Estaba claro que su señoría era una persona original, y original con fuerza; pero a Hyacinth le producía verdadera angustia verla despreciar Inglefield (sobre todo el parque) y las oportunidades que debían de encontrarse en Belgrave Square. Había creído siempre que, en un mundo de sufrimiento e injusticia, esas cosas, si no las más íntegras, eran al menos las más fascinantes. Si no le proporcionaban a uno las más hermosas sensaciones, ¿adonde habría que ir a buscarlas? Contempló a *lady* Aurora con cara que era un tributo a su repentina vivacidad, y dijo:

—Comprendo muy bien que necesite hacer algo bueno en el mundo, porque es usted una especie de santa.

—¡Una especie muy curiosa! —rió *lady* Aurora.

—Pero lo que no puedo comprender es que no le guste lo que su posición le ofrece.

—No sé nada de mi posición. ¡Yo quiero vivir!

—¿Y llama usted vida a *esto*?

—Le diré lo que es mi posición si quiere saberlo: es la quietud de la tumba.

A Hyacinth le sorprendió el tono, pero se rió también:

—¡Ya digo que no es mala santa!

No contestó, porque en aquel momento se abrió la puerta y de la oscuridad de la escalera emergió la gran figura de Paul Muniment, que apareció en la penumbra del cuarto, muy débil entonces. Los ojos de *lady* Aurora, al posarse sobre él, parecían declarar que aquella visión sí era vida por lo menos; otra persona tan alta como él apareció detrás, y Hyacinth reconoció con asombro a su insinuante amigo, el capitán Sholto. Paul le había llevado para entretener a Rosy, pues estaba siempre dispuesto, y más que dispuesto, a llevar al primero que encontrase, ya fuera el primer ministro o el verdugo, con tal que pudieran causarle sensación a la señorita. Debían de haberse encontrado en el Sol y Luna y, si el capitán, aprovechando cualquier circunstancia, le había hecho la mitad de los avances que había hecho a otras personas, Hyacinth veía venir que Paul no tardaría en asociarle. Pero ¿que buscaba el capitán? No puede decirse que Hyacinth llegara a ninguna conclusión aquella noche. La ocasión resultaba festiva, y la anfitriona supo ponerse a la altura sin levantar la cabeza de la almohada. Su hermano presentó al capitán Sholto como un caballero que deseaba conocer gente extraordinaria; ella le hizo tomar posesión de la silla que estaba junto a la cama, y que *miss* Pynsent, rápidamente, abandonó, y le preguntó quién era, de dónde venía, cómo le había conocido Paul y si tenía muchos amigos en Camberwell. Sholto no tenía el gran aire que parecía irradiar en el teatro; estaba vestido con muy ingeniosa baratura, y su atuendo, aunque por caminos muy diferentes, venía a coincidir con el del pobre Hyacinth; pero el disfraz le hizo al chico preguntarse qué sería lo que le daba aquel inconfundible aspecto de señor, a pesar de la exageración que ponía en sus apreciaciones, como si estuviese enajenado, y de su pretensión de hacer creer que todo y todos eran de lo más encantador y curioso. Destacaba en la poco agradable habitación de Rosy, entre sus horrendos intentos de decoración, y le parecía a Hyacinth un ser de otro planeta, dedicado a repartir entre los presentes una sonrisa (no podía decirse si falsa o fastidiosa, pero sin duda poco natural), que había aprendido en patios y campamentos. La sonrisa se hizo más notoria al posarse en nuestro héroe, al que saludó como a un viejo amigo del que se hubiera separado con pena y mucho tiempo antes. Actuaba con naturalidad, se mostraba familiar y exquisitamente amable y educado, pero… seguía siendo un enigma.

De todos modos, Rosy fue una prueba para él; era evidente que no la había desconcertado lo más mínimo y que consideraba que su visita era la cosa más natural del mundo. Expresó toda la gratitud que reclamaba la cortesía, pero parecía dar por sentado que quien subía la escalera quedaba siempre

recompensado. Le dijo que su hermano debía de haberle conocido aquel mismo día, pues su forma de sellar una nueva amistad era normalmente llevar a la persona que había conocido a visitarla a ella. Cuando el capitán dijo que suponía que, si no le gustaban a ella, los desgraciados eran despachados inmediatamente, admitió que así sería si se presentara el caso, pero que hasta entonces no había tenido que negar la entrada a nadie. Quizá porque no había llevado nunca a ningún conspirador, esos tipos que conocía por motivos que no podían mencionarse. En general, tenía muy mala opinión de esa gente, y no quería ocultar su deseo de que el capitán Sholto no fuera uno de ellos. Rosy hablaba de su hermano como si representara al distrito de Camberwell en la Cámara de los Comunes y hubiera descubierto que la carrera parlamentaria rebajaba el tono moral. El capitán estaba de acuerdo en todo, y le dijo que él y Muniment habían ido allí como amigos comunes del señor Robinson; le apreciaban los dos tanto, que eso había creado inmediatamente entre ellos una especie de unión. Al oír exaltado su nombre de tan brillante manera, el señor Robinson volvió la cabeza; comprendía que podía confiarse en que el capitán Sholto hiciera un esfuerzo tan grande para entretener a Rosy como el que había hecho con Milly Henning la noche del teatro. No había sillas suficientes, y Paul fue a buscar a su cuarto un taburete de tres patas, después de lo cual se dispuso a hacer té para los asistentes con ayuda de un cazo de hojalata y un hornillo de alcohol, instrumentos que habían sido colocados allí, junto a media docena de tazas, probablemente en honor de la modista venida desde tan lejos. Hyacinth observó con gusto que la modista estaba en plena conversación con *lady* Aurora, que se inclinaba hacia ella, se azoraba, sonreía, titubeaba y parecía tan nerviosa que Pinnie, en comparación, resultaba majestuosa y serena. Le comunicaron el plan que habían urdido rápidamente entre las dos, y que consistía en que *miss* Pynsent fuera con su señoría a Belgrave Square y resolvieran allí ciertos preliminares relacionados con la bata, para la que, si *miss* Pynsent estaba de acuerdo, su señoría esperaba proporcionar varios trozos de tela que habían demostrado su buena calidad en muy honrosos servicios y que debidamente teñidos podían adquirir el color indicado. Hyacinth veía que Pinnie se encontraba en un estado de exaltación religiosa; la visita a Belgrave Square y la idea de cooperar de semejante manera con la nobleza eran privilegios a los que no podía concederles bastante solemnidad. Y el último de esos lujos tuvo ocasión de disfrutarlo en seguida, pues *lady* Aurora opinó que el señor Muniment podía no darse muy buena maña para hacer el té, y era mejor que se encargaran ellas. Paul renunció en favor de ellas, pretendiendo lamentar el alto concepto en que se tenían, y diciendo que de todas maneras hacían falta dos mujeres para sustituir a un hombre. Hyacinth le llevó hacia la ventana para preguntarle dónde había encontrado a Sholto y qué le parecía.

Se habían encontrado en Bloomsbury como suponía Hyacinth y el capitán había tratado de congraciarse con él, igual que un vicario de pueblo habría tratado de hacerlo con un arzobispo. Quería saber lo que pensaba de eso; del estado de la demanda de trabajo en Extremo Oriente, del terrible caso de la vieja que había muerto de hambre en Walham Green, de si sería posible un aumento sistemático de la agitación externa, y del proyecto de llevar a uno de sus hombres —uno de los de Bloomsbury— a la Cámara.

—Se portó estupendamente —dijo Muniment— y no he notado hasta ahora que me haya robado nada. Daba la impresión de que quería que yo le presentase como a uno de los nuestros, de los de Bloomsbury. Hace demasiadas preguntas, pero tiene la ventaja de que no presta la menor atención a las respuestas. Me dijo que daría media vida por ver el verdadero «interior» de un obrero. Al principio yo no sabía dónde pensaba cazarme: decía que ansiaba ver una buena muestra, una de las mejores; había visto ya una o dos, pero no creía que estuvieran a la altura. Supongo que se refería a la casita que tiene Schinkel, el ebanista, y quería comparar. Yo le dije que no sabía que tal resultaría la mía, pero que se le daba la bienvenida y que encontraría, en cualquier caso, dos cosas muy originales. Espero que le haya parecido así al ver a Rosy y a la dama noble. Yo quería enseñar a Rosy; para eso sí que sirve, aunque no para otra cosa. Le dije que esperábamos a unos pocos amigos, y que era muy buen momento, y me aseguró que tomar parte en una ocasión semejante era el sueño de toda su vida. Parecía tener mucha prisa, como si fuera a enseñarle un tesoro escondido, y se empeñó en llevarme en coche. Quizá piense introducir el uso de carruajes entre las clases trabajadoras; si es ésa su plataforma, trabajaré para que le elijan. Al venir me habló de ti; me dijo que eras íntimo amigo suyo.

—¿Qué dijo de mí? —preguntó Hyacinth impaciente.

—¡Golfillo vanidoso!

—¿Me llamó eso? —preguntó ingenuamente Hyacinth.

—Dijo que eras sencillamente asombroso.

—¿Sencillamente asombroso? —repitió Hyacinth.

—Para una persona de tan baja extracción.

—Bueno, puede que yo sea un tipo raro, pero él es más raro todavía. ¿No te parece que sí ahora que le

conoces?

Paul echó una ojeada a su amigo:

—¿Quieres saber lo que es? Un revendedor.

—¿Un revendedor? ¿Qué quieres decir?

—Pues un gancho si te parece mejor.

Hyacinth se le quedó mirando:

—Pero ¿de quién? Haz el favor de aclararlo.

—O un pescador de altura, si te gusta más todavía. Te doy varias comparaciones para que puedas elegir. Iba haciéndolas mientras veníamos en el coche. Echa las redes y saca los pececillos, los lindos pececillos brillantes que colean. Son todos para *ella*; se los engulle.

—¿Para ella? ¿Quieres decir la princesa?

—¿Y quién iba a querer decir? ¡Ten cuidado, renacuajo!

—¿Por qué tener cuidado? El otro día me dijiste que no lo tuviera.

—Sí, me acuerdo, pero ahora veo más cosas.

—¿Habló de ella? ¿Qué dijo? —preguntó Hyacinth, impaciente.

—No puedo decirte ahora lo que dijo, pero te diré lo que he adivinado.

—¿Y qué es?

Habían estado hablando en voz baja, y sus palabras quedaban ahogadas por la charla de Rosy en su rincón, las generosas carcajadas con que la acompañaba el capitán Sholto y los acentos mucho más discretos y serios de *lady* Aurora y de *miss* Pynsent. Pero Muniment bajó aún más la voz —Hyacinth estaba pendiente de sus palabras—, para decir:

—¡Bah! Es un monstruo.

—¿Un monstruo? —repitió Hyacinth, dispuesto a soltar exclamaciones y repetir lo que decía su amigo.

Paul miró al capitán, que parecía cada vez más animado con la charla de Rosy:

—Yo creo que no es peligroso. Sólo un paciente pescador de caña.

Hay que confesar que el capitán Sholto justificaba el calificativo hasta cierto punto por la forma en que cebaba el anzuelo para pescar todos los pequeños detalles que pudieran ayudarle a tener un conocimiento más íntimo de su anfitrión y de su hermana. Cuando el té estuvo preparado, Rosy pidió a *miss* Pynsent que tuviera la bondad de servirlo. Debían dejar descansar un poco a su señoría, ¿no?, y Hyacinth comprendía que en su inocente e inveterada condescendencia deseaba recompensar y animar a la modista, realzarla ante todos, concediéndole aquel amable servicio. Pero el capitán Sholto se levantó de un salto, le quitó la taza de la mano, y rogó a Pinnie que le permitiera relevarla; y la pobre Pinnie, que comprendió en seguida que era una especie de misterioso mascarón, que estaba desconcertada por la extraña mezcla de elementos que la rodeaban y no tenía costumbre de verse tratada como una duquesa (la actitud del capitán era un verdadero alarde de galantería), se dejó caer en una silla y dirigió una sonrisa suplicante y asustada a *lady* Aurora, consciente de que por muy versada que estuviera en las reglas de urbanidad no tenía precedentes para enfrentarse a una situación semejante.

—¿Y cuántas familias hay en una casa como ésta? ¿Qué pueden ustedes decirme de las condiciones sanitarias? ¿Vive más gente en este mismo piso (es el tercero o el cuarto), además de ustedes? ¿Les parece que es un buen ejemplo de viviendas de esta clase?

El caballero hacía preguntas de ese estilo para amenizar el té, mientras Hyacinth pensaba que, siendo evidente que lo hacía con buena intención, no mostraba mucho tacto y sí una curiosidad demasiado paternal. El capitán pedía información sobre la posición que ocupaban, las aficiones y costumbres de los inquilinos, el alquiler que pagaban, las relaciones entre unos y otros, dentro y fuera de la familia.

—¿Les parece que están muy hacinados y que podría observarse una notable falta de… sobriedad?

Paul Muniment, que se había bebido el té de un trago —no se ofrecía una segunda taza—, contemplaba la oscuridad, ya completa desde la ventana, con las manos metidas en los bolsillos y silbando con muy poca educación, pero con buen ánimo. Parecía haber dejado al visitante en manos de Rosy y creer que, dijera lo que dijera, no iba ser más que grano para el molino incansable de la chica. *Lady* Aurora daba vueltas a su dolor, y Hyacinth, como prueba de su instinto de hombre de mundo, adivinó claramente que aquella nueva amistad le parecía muy vulgar. Estaba más bien molesta —Hyacinth había visto aquella tarde que *lady* Aurora también podía molestarse— por la alegría con que contestaba Rosy: la personilla de la cama no le negaba una satisfacción al capitán, consideraba que sus preguntas eran el tributo debido a la honradez humilde, y le proporcionaba todas las estadísticas y anécdotas que quisiera, y que había obtenido a través de un misterioso proceso, sobre los habitantes de Audley Court. Por fin su señoría, a quien Paul Muniment no había tenido que molestarse en darle conversación, se despidió de la chica y le dijo a Hyacinth que se

hacía cargo de *miss* Pynsent para el resto de la velada. Pinnie podía haber estado expuesta a entregarse a los más monstruosos ritos ahora que se encontraba a punto de ser transportada a Belgrave Square, pero Hyacinth no dudaba de que sabría salir airosa; y cuando se ofreció a buscarla más tarde, le recordó en voz muy baja y con triste sonrisa los muchos años que había andado después de anochecer por las calles de Londres para repartir la labor, que llevaba envuelta en un trapo.

Paul Muniment, según costumbre, acompañó a *lady* Aurora para alumbrarla en la escalera, y el capitán Sholto y Hyacinth se quedaron unos minutos a solas con Rosy; lo que dio oportunidad al primero para decir, al tiempo que cogía el sombrero y el bastón:

—¿Hacia dónde vas? ¿No llevaremos por casualidad el mismo camino?

Hyacinth comprendió que el capitán deseaba que le acompañara, y vio también que, por extraño que fuera que Paul le dejara subir y aunque se hubiese mostrado demasiado entremetido, era un hombre atractivo y le resultaba tan difícil resistirse a él como la noche en que se encontraron en el teatro. El capitán se inclinó sobre la cama de Rosy como hubiera hecho ante una hermosa dama recostada en un sofá de satén, prometió volver pronto y con frecuencia, y ambos salieron de la casa. En la escalera se encontraron con Paul, y Hyacinth sintió cierta vergüenza, no sabía muy bien por qué, de que su amigo le viera marcharse con el «gancho». Después de todo, si Paul le había llevado a ver a su hermana, ¿no podía el fiel discípulo irse con él?

—Volveré, ¿sabes?, volveré muchas veces. Estoy seguro de que vais a pensar que soy un pelmazo —anunció el capitán al dar las buenas noches a Muniment—. Tu hermana es una mujer interesantísima, una de las personas más interesantes que he visto en mi vida, y todo en general, pues es justo lo que yo quería ver, sólo que mucho más, muchísimo más original y curioso. Ha sido una visita afortunada, un verdadero éxito.

Y el capitán se abrió paso por el oscuro túnel, mientras Paul Muniment le concedía desde arriba la luz de una palmatoria vacilante y contestaba a sus amables palabras con un «¡Muy bien, tiene que tomarnos como le parezca!», y una carcajada sonora pero amistosa.

Media hora más tarde, Hyacinth se encontraba en los aposentos del capitán Sholto, sentado en un enorme diván con cojines y alfombras persas, y fumando el puro más caro que se había llevado a los labios. Después de salir de Audley Court, el capitán le había cogido del brazo y los dos habían ido andando informal y amistosamente hasta que al llegar al puente de Westminster (habían seguido el malecón más abajo del hospital de Saint Thomas). Sholto dijo de repente:

—Por cierto, ¿por qué no vienes conmigo a casa y ves el sitio donde vivo? Tengo unas cuantas cosas que podrían divertirte: algunos cuadros, una serie de chismes que he ido encontrando y unas pocas encuadernaciones; podrías decirme lo que te parecen.

Hyacinth aceptó sin dudarlo; todavía resonaban en sus oídos las encuestas del capitán en la habitación de Rosy, y no veía motivo para no aprovechar aquella ocasión de comprobar por su parte cómo era la vida de un hombre a la moda en aquellos tiempos.

Aquel determinado ejemplar vivía en una casa grande y antigua de la calle Queen Anne, donde ocupaba los pisos superiores, y había llenado las habitaciones, recubiertas de altos paneles de madera, con los despojos de sus viajes y algunas ingenuidades modernistas. Daba la impresión de que no había país en el mundo que no hubiera saqueado, y todos aquellos trofeos representaban para Hyacinth una bolsa asombrosamente repleta. El lugar entero, desde el criado inexpresivo, que hablaba en voz baja, y que después de echar coñac en unos vasos altos, destapó con solemnidad dos botellas de soda, hasta el extraño receptáculo de plata en que le invitaron a depositar la ceniza del cigarro, era tal revelación para el avispado joven que se sentía acobardado y deprimido, pues veía que hacían falta miles de cosas, que jamás tendría ni llegaría a conocer, para transformarle en un ser civilizado. Muchas veces, en sus paseos nocturnos, se había preguntado qué habría detrás de las paredes de algunas grandes casas del West End y de sus ventanas iluminadas, y entonces empezaba a hacerse una idea. El primer efecto fue dejarle más bien apabullado.

—Bueno, y ahora dime qué piensas de nuestra amiga la princesa —propuso el capitán, estirando los pies con unas babuchas amarillas que su criado le había ayudado a cambiar por los zapatos.

Hablaba como si hubiese estado esperando con impaciencia el momento apropiado para hacer esa pregunta, ya que era mucho lo que dependía de la respuesta.

—Es guapa… guapa —contestó Hyacinth, casi en un sueño, y mientras sus ojos inspeccionaban la habitación.

—Le interesó mucho todo lo que dijiste; le encantaría volver a verte. Piensa escribirte… supongo que puede hacerlo al Sol y Luna, ¿no?, y espero que vayas a su casa si te lo propone alguna vez.

—No sé, no sé. Todo parece muy raro.

—¿Qué te parece raro, muchacho?

—¡Todo! Que yo esté aquí sentado con usted; que me presentaran a esa señora; que quiera volver a verme, según dice, y que piense escribirme; y toda esta casa, con toda esa serie de cosas colgadas en las paredes y brillando a la luz de esa lámpara rosa. Y usted también, usted es lo más raro de todo.

Después de esta última declaración, el capitán le miró tan silencioso y con tanta fijeza que Hyacinth pensó que quizá se hubiera ofendido. Pero la impresión se disipó pronto al recibir nuevas muestras de atención y hospitalidad, y Sholto aprovechó para decirle que consideraba muy importante, en los tiempos que corrían, enterarse bien de lo que pasaba, pues era seguro que estaban destinados, «en ese asunto de las relaciones entre las distintas clases y en todo ese tipo de cosas, ya sabes», a presenciar algunos acontecimientos extraordinarios.

El capitán hablaba como si él, por su parte, fuera hijo de la época (únicamente quería ver cuanto pudiera mostrarle) hasta la punta misma de sus babuchas amarillas. A Hyacinth le parecía que su actuación con la princesa no había sido muy satisfactoria; pero como sus nervios empezaban a sosegarse y a ponerse un poco más a tono con el ambiente, le dijo lo que Milly había contado de ella en el teatro, y preguntó si la señorita habría entendido bien al decir que su marido la había echado de casa.

—Sí, la puso materialmente de patitas en la calle, bueno, en el jardín, porque creo que la escena sucedió en el campo. Pero a lo mejor la señorita Henning no dijo, o quizá fuera yo, que el príncipe daría ahora todo lo que tiene en el mundo porque volviera. ¡Puede imaginarse escena más absurda! —dijo el capitán, riéndose de una manera que a Hyacinth le pareció muy poco respetuosa.

Hyacinth contemplaba en su imaginación el cuadro, con los ojos de par en par, y tendía a compararlo con el único incidente de ese género que había presenciado: la forzada expulsión tabernaria de unas mujeres borrachas:

Pero una mujer tan magnífica, ¿qué había hecho?

—¡Ah, nada! Le hizo comprender que era un asno —contestó el capitán.

Éste cambió de conversación para hablar de la señorita Henning; dijo lo que se alegraba de que Hyacinth le diera la ocasión para hablar de ella. Se habían entendido estupendamente; quizá se lo hubiera dicho. Se habían hecho grandes amigos —*en tout bien tout honneur, s'entend*—. Resultaba también otro tipo londinense, plebeyo, pero grande, y ¡qué poca justicia solía hacérsele con lo magnífico que era!

—Chico, he visto muchas mujeres, y de muchos países, y las he visto todo lo íntimamente que puedas imaginar, y sé muy bien de qué hablo; pero si te digo que ésa… ¡uf, ésa!… —Calló de repente, riéndose con su democrático estilo—. Quizá esté hablando demasiado; tienes que frenarme cuando lo haga. De todos modos, te felicito, y lo hago de todo corazón. Coge otro cigarro. Oye, y qué… ¿qué sueldo puede ganar en esa tienda? Sé donde está; pienso ir y comprar unos pañuelos.

Hyacinth no sabía si el capitán Sholto había hablado demasiado ni tampoco por qué le felicitaba exactamente, y simuló tener la misma ignorancia en lo referente a las ganancias de Millicent. Además, no quería hablar de ella ni de su propia vida tampoco; quería hablar de la vida del capitán y sacar alguna información que estuviera en armonía con sus románticas habitaciones, que le recordaban a uno, en cierto modo, las novelas de Bulwer. Su anfitrión cumplió sus deseos con liberalidad y le contó más de veinte historias sobre cosas interesantes, y a menudo asombrosas, que le habían ocurrido en Albania, en Madagascar o en París. Hyacinth le animó a que hablara de París (desde un punto de vista muy distinto del de *monsieur* Poupin), y estuvo allí sentado y bebiendo con él, fascinado. Lo único que no estaba a la altura era la encuadernación de los libros, y le dijo con franqueza y con conciencia de artista que realmente desentonaban. Después de dejar la calle Queen Anne estaba demasiado excitado para irse derecho a casa; anduvo dando vueltas, con la cabeza llena de imágenes y extrañas conjeturas, hasta que las grises calles de Londres empezaron a clarear con el amanecer veraniego.

XVI

El aspecto de South Street, en el distrito de Mayfair, un domingo por la tarde y en el mes de agosto es muy poco animado, pero el príncipe llevaba diez minutos mirando por la ventana el elegante vacío de la escena; las bajadas persianas de las casas de enfrente, el guardia solitario en la esquina, que ocultaba el bostezo con una mano enguantada de blanco, y hasta la discreta luz que parecía comprender la obligación de observar decentemente el sagrado sábado británico. Claro que nuestro personaje tenía verdadero talento para mantener esa actitud; era una de las cosas que habían exasperado a su mujer; con ayuda de alguna cosa que sostuviera su alta y delgada persona podía quedarse quieto, contemplando con calma y sin dar signos de vida cualquier objeto que tuviera ante él y ofreciera un ángulo favorable a su aristocrática cabeza durante un período de tiempo extraordinariamente largo. Al entrar en la habitación se había fijado un poco en la decoración y en los muebles, y había visto en seguida que eran ricos y variados; algunas cosas las reconocía como a viejos amigos, chismes a los que la princesa tenía cariño y que la habían acompañado en sus numerosos traslados, pero había otras cosas que no eran familiares y le hacían comprender claramente que no había dejado de «coleccionar». Pensó dos cosas: una, que seguía llevando una vida tan cara como siempre, y la otra, que fuera lo que fuera, no había nadie que tuviera tanto gusto para la *mise-en-scène*, un talento semejante para arreglar una habitación. Dondequiera que estuviese, las suyas eran siempre las más bonitas de Europa.

Su impresión era que hacía sólo tres meses que había cogido la casa de South Street, pero ¡santo cielo, cuánto había podido meter allí! El príncipe se hizo la pregunta sin violencia: no era la línea que debía seguir aquel día. Podía llegar a enfadarse hasta un punto del que él mismo se asustaba, pero creía también que lo hacía únicamente cuando le pinchaban más de lo soportable; normalmente era agradable y de buen carácter, como su extremada urbanidad parecía anunciar. Realmente no había en él nada que pudiera sugerirle a cualquiera que era un noble intratable y vengativo: no tenía las facciones regulares, y el color de su piel era bilioso, pero los ojos, oscuros, saltones e inexpresivos, reflejaban benevolencia y tristeza; inclinaba la cabeza de una manera atenta y considerada; y su pelo, muy corto, combinado con una barba fina y puntiaguda, completaba el parecido con algún viejo retrato de un personaje noble de la época de la dominación española en Nápoles. Aquel día había llegado con ánimo conciliatorio, casi de humildad, y no se permitía ni un murmullo ante la larga espera que había de aguantar. Sabía muy bien que si su mujer aceptaba que volviera, sería sólo después de una prueba en comparación de la cual la espera en el salón no era más que una broma. Pasó un cuarto de hora entero antes de que la puerta se abriera, y no fue la princesa la que apareció sino *madame* Grandoni.

Su encuentro, en el primer momento, fue una renuncia a las palabras. Fue hacia él con las manos tendidas, cogió la suya y la retuvo un momento, mirándole con afabilidad. Había alargado su colorada y sonriente cara hasta un grado casi cómico y, en su silencio solemne, los dos hubieran podido pasar por conocidos que se encuentran en la casa donde van a celebrarse las exequias de un difunto. En realidad era una casa a la que había bajado la muerte, y él pronto pudo leerlo en la expresión de *madame* Grandoni; algo había muerto allí para siempre y podía disponerse a enterrarlo cuando mejor le pareciera. Pero su vieja amiga alemana no era la persona indicada para mantener esa nota mucho tiempo y, cuando después de haberle hecho sentarse junto a ella en el sofá, movió la cabeza despacio y varias veces, lo hizo con un gesto en el que aparecía una visión más cordial de los hechos.

—¿Nunca, nunca, nunca? —dijo el príncipe con una voz ronca y profunda, que no estaba nada de acuerdo con su aspecto.

Tenía el aire que puede verse en los últimos descendientes de algunas razas viejas y que hoy día calificamos de caduco, pero el tono de la voz, en cambio, le hubiera servido a algún robusto antepasado para lanzar su grito de guerra.

—Conoces a tu mujer tan bien como yo —contestó ella en italiano, que hablaba con facilidad, pero con un fuerte acento gutural—. He estado hablando con ella: por eso te he hecho esperar. Le he pedido que viniera a verte. He dicho que eso no empeoraría las cosas y que no la comprometía a nada. Pero ya conoces a tu mujer —repitió *madame* Grandoni con intensidad muy atenuada.

El príncipe Casamassima se miró las botas:

—¿Cómo puede uno conocer a una persona como ella? Esperaba que me viera cinco minutitos.

—¿Con qué objeto? ¿Tienes algo que proponer?

—¿Con qué objeto? Para poner mis ojos en su bonita cara.

—¿Y has venido a Inglaterra para eso?

—¿A qué venir si no? —preguntó el príncipe, al tiempo que volvía su apagada mirada hacia el lado opuesto de South Street.

—En Londres y en un día como éste, *già* —dijo cariñosamente la señora—. Pues lo siento por ti, pero de haber sabido que pensabas venir te habría escrito para ahorrarte la molestia.

Él dejó escapar un suspiro:

—Me preguntas si tengo algo que proponer. Pues lo que quiero proponer es que mi mujer no siga matándome poco a poco.

—¡Tendría muchas más ocasiones de hacerlo si vivieras con ella!

—*Cara amica*, no parece que te haya matado a ti —contestó con tristeza el aristócrata.

—¡Huy, a mí!, a mí ya no hay quien me mate. Soy más dura que una piedra. Yo pasé mis desgracias hace mucho; sufrí más de lo que tú has sufrido; llegué a desear la muerte muchas veces, pero sobreviví a todo. Las penas no nos matan, *principe mio*; somos nosotros los que tenemos que matarlas. Yo he enterrado ya unas cuantas. Aparte de eso, Christina me quiere, ¡el diablo sabrá por qué! —concluyó *madame* Grandoni.

—Y tú eres muy buena con ella —dijo el príncipe, que puso su mano sobre la muñeca, gorda y arrugada, de la amiga.

—*Che vuole?* La conozco desde hace mucho. Y tiene grandes cualidades.

—¿A quién vas a decírselo? —Volvió a mirarse las botas en silencio, y preguntó después—: ¿Cómo está hoy?

—Siempre está lo mismo: igual que un ángel que hubiera caído ayer del cielo y se sintiera un poco desilusionado de su primer día en la tierra.

El príncipe era una naturaleza sencilla, y la metáfora, más bien forzada, de *madame* Grandoni le gustó. Se le animó un poco la cara y contestó con vehemencia:

—Es la única mujer que he visto no pierda belleza en algún momento. ¡Y está guapísima cuando se enfada!

—Hoy está guapísima, pero no enfadada.

—¿Ni siquiera cuando le anunciaron mi nombre?

—Yo no estaba con ella entonces; pero cuando mandó a buscarme y me pidió que viniera a verte lo hizo sin excitarse. Y cuando yo discutí con ella y traté de persuadirla (ya sabes que eso no le gusta nada) seguía estando tranquila.

—Me odia, me desprecia demasiado, ¿eh?

—¿Cómo voy a saberlo, querido príncipe, si no te menciona nunca?

—¿Nunca, nunca?

—Es mucho mejor que si se burlara o hablara mal.

—¿Quieres decir que puedo tener alguna esperanza para el futuro? —preguntó rápidamente el príncipe.

Su vieja amiga hizo una pausa:

—Quiero decir que es mejor para mí —contestó con una carcajada, cuyo amistoso sonido cubría en lo posible el equívoco.

—Me quieres lo bastante como para preocuparte —murmuró, mirándola con ojos tristes y agradecidos.

—Lo siento mucho. *Ma che vuole?*

El príncipe, al parecer, no tenía nada que decir, y se limitó a soltar otro triste gemido. Luego preguntó si su mujer se encontraba a gusto en aquel país y si pensaba pasar el verano en Londres. ¿Pensaba quedarse mucho tiempo en Inglaterra y, si podía tomarse la libertad de preguntarlo, cuáles eran sus planes? *Madame* Grandoni contestó que a la princesa la capital de Inglaterra le había gustado más de lo que podía esperarse, y que tenía tantos planes o tan pocos como siempre. ¿La había visto alguna vez llevar a cabo alguna cosa o hacer algo de lo que había preparado o prometido? En el último momento siempre hacía lo contrario, lo que no parecía tener importancia, y por eso *madame* Grandoni hacía preparativos por su cuenta. Christina,

ya que todo había pasado, se marcharía de Londres en cualquier momento, pero no sabrían adonde iban hasta que hubieran llegado. La señora terminó preguntando al príncipe si a él le gustaba Inglaterra.

Hizo un gesto con los labios:

—¿Cómo va a gustarme? Aparte de eso, ya he estado aquí. Tengo muchos amigos.

Madame Grandoni veía que quería decirle algo más, hacer preguntas, pero vacilaba nervioso, porque temía recibir alguna advertencia, algún desaire, que su dignidad, realmente muy grande, a pesar del mal momento que atravesaba, iba a encontrar difícil de soportar. Echó una mirada a la habitación y dijo:

—Quería ver por mí mismo cómo vive.

—Sí, es muy natural.

—He oído… he oído… —y el príncipe Casamassima se paró.

—Has oído toda clase de porquerías, eso no lo dudo. —*Madame* Grandoni le vigilaba, como si se temiera lo que iba a venir.

—Gasta una cantidad de dinero tremenda.

—Sí, claro que lo hace.

Madame Grandoni sabía que, aunque se preocupaba por su considerable fortuna, que en tiempos había necesitado muchos cuidados, no era la prodigalidad de su mujer lo que más le pesaba. Sabía también que por muy gastadora que fuera Christina, nunca había sobrepasado la cantidad que el príncipe le asignó al separarse, y que estaba determinada por lo que él estimaba necesario para mantener el rango social que correspondía a su nombre, por el que sentía ilimitado respeto.

—Ella cree que es un modelo de economía, le parece que cuenta cada chelín. Si hay alguna virtud de la que se precie es precisamente ésa. En realidad, es la única cosa por la que tiene algún crédito.

—Ignoro si sabe que yo… —vaciló, luego dijo— no gasto apenas nada. Pero antes viviría a pan seco que consentir que en un país como éste, y en medio de esta gran sociedad inglesa, no hiciera el papel que le corresponde.

—El papel que hace es tan bueno como pueda desearse. Claro que, ¿cómo no iba a serlo teniéndome a mí para ayudarla?

—Tú eres lo mejor que tiene, querida amiga. Mientras estés con ella siento cierta seguridad; y uno de los motivos de mi viaje ha sido obtener la promesa de que no vas a dejarla.

—¡Huy! No nos enredemos con promesas —exclamó *madame* Grandoni—. Ya conoces el valor de cualquier compromiso que uno pueda tomar con respecto a la princesa. Es como prometerte que voy a quedarme en el baño cuando el agua esté hirviendo. Cuando empezara a escaldarme tendría que saltar afuera, aunque estuviera en cueros. Estaré mientras pueda, pero no me quedaré si hace ciertas cosas.

Madame Grandoni pronunció estas últimas palabras con mucho énfasis, y los dos estuvieron mirándose a los ojos un momento.

—¿Qué cosas quieres decir?

—No puedo decir qué cosas. Es absolutamente imposible predecir lo que haga Christina en cualquier momento. Es capaz de darnos grandes sorpresas. Las cosas que quiero decir son cosas que reconocería en cuanto las viera, y que me harían salir de casa inmediatamente.

—O sea que si todavía no te has marchado… —dijo el príncipe muy serio.

—Ha sido porque he pensado que todavía podía hacer algo si me quedaba.

No pareció muy satisfecho de la respuesta; pero, pasado un momento, dijo:

—Para mí eso es toda la diferencia. Si sucediera algo de lo que dices, más razones habría para que te quedaras. Podrías interponerte, podrías pararlo… —El príncipe se paró también ante su gran mueca alemana.

—Supongo que más de una vez has estado en Roma cuando se desborda el Tiber, *è vero?* ¿Y qué te hubiera parecido entonces oír decir a la gente, a los desgraciados del *ghetto* y de la *ripetta*, cuando estaban con el barro hasta la rodilla, que se interpusieran, que lo pararan?

—*Capisco bene* —dijo el príncipe, bajando los ojos. Por unos momentos pareció que los había cerrado, como si sintiese un gran dolor—. No puedo decirte qué es lo que más me atormenta, lo que hace que algunas veces parezca que se me sube el corazón a la boca. Es un miedo que me persigue.

La palidez de su cara y la respiración agitada podían pasar por las de un hombre que acaba de ver un espectro.

—No necesitas decírmelo. Lo comprendo muy bien, querido amigo.

—¿Entonces crees que *hay* peligro, que va a arrastrar mi apellido y a hacer lo que no se ha atrevido a hacer nadie? —preguntó casi en un susurro y con voz ronca que producía mucho efecto.

Madame Grandoni pensó si no sería mejor decirle de una vez (ya que debía prepararse a lo peor) que su

mujer se preocupaba tanto de su apellido como de las etiquetas viejas de las maletas; pero después de pensarlo un momento se reservó la noticia para mejor ocasión. Además, pensó para sus adentros que el príncipe sabría bien que Christina consideraba que las obligaciones y prohibiciones se derivaban únicamente de su malhadada unión con la raza italiana, ignorante y supersticiosa, a la que despreciaba por provinciana, tacaña e inútil (pensaba que su conversación era el colmo del infantilismo) y de la que se había burlado varias veces en público por el necio concepto que tenían de su importancia en el mundo. Por fin, se limitó a comentar:

—Querido príncipe, tu esposa es una mujer muy orgullosa.

—¿Y cómo podría no serlo? Pero su orgullo no es el mío. ¡Y tiene unas ideas, unas opiniones! Algunas son monstruosas.

Madame Grandoni sonrió:

—No cree tan necesario tenerlas cuando no estás tú delante.

—¿Por qué comprendes entonces mis temores y dices que te imaginas las historias que he oído?

No sé si la buena señora perdió la paciencia al ver que insistía, pero dijo con cierta brusquedad:

—Comprende una cosa, comprende una cosa: Christina nunca te considerará a ti, tu apellido, tus ilustres tradiciones, más de lo que se considera a sí misma.

El príncipe pareció estudiar por un momento aquella ambigua aunque fabulosa frase; luego se levantó despacio, con el sombrero en la mano, y empezó a andar por la habitación, con solemnidad, suavemente, como si le dolieran sus largos pies. Se paró delante de una de las ventanas y volvió a echar otra mirada a South Street; después, preguntó de repente, con una voz en la que era evidente que había tratado de imponer frialdad:

—¿La admiran mucho aquí? ¿Ve a mucha gente?

—Creen que es una persona muy rara, desde luego. Pero ve a quien le apetece. Y con casi todos ellos se aburre de muerte —añadió *madame* Grandoni convencida.

—¿Por qué me dices entonces que le gusta este país?

La señora se levantó. Había prometido a Christina, que detestaba la idea de estar bajo el mismo techo que su marido, que la visita se mantendría dentro de límites muy prudentes, y aquel movimiento significaba también, con tanta amabilidad como fuera posible, que debía terminar:

—Lo que le gusta es la gente baja —contestó, con las manos cruzadas sobre las sedas arrugadas de su estómago, y con unos ojos que aún sabían fingir—. La clase baja, el *basso popolo*.

—¿El *basso popolo*? —preguntó el príncipe, asombrado ante tan fantástica noticia.

—Sí, la *povera gente* —repitió su amiga, divertida al ver su espanto.

—¿La plebe de Londres… La más espantosa, la chusma?

—Quiere elevarlos.

—Después de todo, es más o menos lo que había oído yo —dijo el príncipe muy serio.

—*Che vuole?* No te preocupes; durará poco.

Madame Grandoni vio que su reconfortante anuncio se perdía; el príncipe había vuelto la cara hacia la puerta, que se había abierto de par en par, y tenía toda su atención puesta en la persona que cruzaba el umbral. Ella miró también hacia el mismo sector y reconoció al mismo artesano a quien Christina, de forma tan extraordinaria y tan característica, había llevado aquella noche al palco del teatro… diciéndole después a su amiga que había mandado a buscarle para que fuera a verla.

—¡El señor Robinson! —anunció el criado, que se sabía bien la lección, en voz alta, pero sin énfasis.

—No durará mucho —repitió *madame* Grandoni, para consuelo del príncipe; parecía que fuera al señor Robinson a quien iban dirigidas sus palabras.

Hyacinth estaba allí de pie; le hacía señas al criado para que dejara abierta la puerta y esperara, y miraba a la extraña señora, que seguía tan extraña como siempre, y al caballero alto y extranjero (vio en seguida que era extranjero), que parecía retarle, devorarle con los ojos. Se preguntaba si habría cometido alguna equivocación, y necesitaba recordar que llevaba en el bolsillo la nota de la princesa, con el día y la hora tan claros como podía ponerlos su magnífica letra.

—Buenos días, buenos días. Espero que se encuentre bien —dijo *madame* Grandoni con familiaridad, pero volviéndole la espalda para dirigirse al otro visitante, en el otro idioma, y mientras le tendía la mano —. ¿Y te marchas pronto de Londres, dentro de uno o dos días?

El príncipe no contestó; seguía examinando al encuadernador de pies a cabeza, como preguntándose quién diablos podría ser. A Hyacinth le daba la impresión de que buscaba el hatillo que debía de llevar bajo el brazo y sin el que resultaba incompleto. Sin embargo, el lector puede saber que, vestido con más cuidado que en toda su vida y bajo esa extraordinaria transformación que el domingo británico puede operar sobre

el *cockney* asalariado, con su hermosa cabeza descubierta y la cara encendida por el asombro, el mozo de Lomax Place podía pasar por cualquiera menos por un recadero.

Como precaución, y por si podían reprocharle haberse precipitado, explicó:

—La princesa me escribió, señora, para que viniera a verla.

—¡Ah, sí! Lo supongo. —Y *madame* Grandoni condujo al príncipe hacia la puerta al tiempo que le deseaba un feliz viaje de regreso a Italia.

Pero seguía allí, tieso, y parecía haber llegado a una negra conclusión sobre el señor Robinson:

—Tengo que volver a verte. Tengo que hacerlo. ¡Es imposible!

—Bueno, pero no en esta casa, ¿eh?

—¿Me concederás el honor de que nos veamos? —preguntó, y al ver que la señora vacilaba, añadió con repentina vehemencia—: Querida amiga, te lo pido de rodillas.

Después de haber quedado en que si le escribía y le proponía día y lugar haría lo posible por verle, el príncipe se llevó a los labios los viejos nudillos de la señora y, sin volver a mirar a Hyacinth, dio media vuelta. Ella dijo al criado que anunciara la otra visita a la princesa, y luego se acercó al señor Robinson, sonriendo y frotándose las manos y con la cabeza muy ladeada. Él sonreía a su vez, vagamente, y no sabía qué iría a decirle. Con gran sorpresa suya, lo que le dijo fue:

—Pobre muchacho mío, ¿puedo tomarme la libertad de preguntar qué edad tiene?

—Naturalmente, señora; tengo veinticuatro años.

—Y espero que sea trabajador, y morigerado en todo, y… ¿cómo dicen en inglés?, juicioso.

—Creo que no soy muy alocado —dijo Hyacinth sin ofenderse. Encontraba a la señora paternalista, pero se lo perdonaba.

—Yo no sé cómo hay que hablar en este país a los jóvenes como usted. A lo mejor me considera impertinente y entremetida.

—Me gusta su manera de hablar —se apresuró a decir Hyacinth.

Le miró, y dijo luego con una dignidad cómica y afectada:

—Es muy amable. Me alegro de que le divierta. No cabe duda de que es inteligente y listo, y sería una pena que se llevara una desilusión.

—¿Qué quiere decir si me llevara una desilusión?

—Bueno, yo diría que cuando viene a una casa como ésta, espera grandes cosas de ella. Debe decirme si le molesto. Estoy muy anticuada y no soy de aquí. Hablo como se habla a los jóvenes como usted en otros sitios.

—¡No me enfado fácilmente! —aseguró Hyacinth en un rasgo de imaginación—. Para esperar algo hay que saber algo y entenderlo, ¿no? Sólo he venido porque una señora que me parece muy guapa y muy amable me ha hecho el honor de llamarme.

Madame Grandoni le examinó un momento, como si le extrañase lo bien parecido que era, la delicadeza que tenía en toda su persona:

—Veo que es muy listo, muy inteligente; no, no es como los jóvenes que yo digo. ¡Con mucho más motivo entonces! —Hizo una pausa y dio un pequeño suspiro; quizá le resultara muy difícil—. Quiero prevenirle un poco, y no sé cómo hacerlo. Si fuera un joven romano sería distinto.

—¿Un joven romano?

—Sí, allí es donde vivo realmente, en la Ciudad Eterna. Si le ofendo, puede explicarlo de esa manera. No, no es como ellos.

—No me ofende, le ruego que me crea; me interesa mucho —dijo Hyacinth, sin darse cuenta de que él también podía parecer paternalista—. ¿De qué quiere prevenirme?

—Bueno, sólo aconsejarle un poco. No renuncie a nada.

—¿A qué puedo renunciar?

—No renuncie a sí mismo. Lo digo en interés suyo. Creo que tiene algún trabajito honrado, se me ha olvidado lo que es. Pero sea lo que sea, recuerde que lo mejor es hacerlo bien; mejor que hacer visitas extraordinarias, mejor incluso que gustar a las princesas.

—¡Ah, sí, ya comprendo lo que quiere decir! —respondió Hyacinth con cierta exageración—. Le aseguro que mi trabajo me gusta mucho.

—Me alegro muchísimo de oírlo. Pues aférrese a él y permanezca tranquilo; sea trabajador y bueno, y siga adelante. La otra noche me pareció entender que era uno de esos jóvenes que quieren cambiarlo todo; creo que hay muchos en Italia y también en mi querida y vieja Alemania, y que hasta opinan que está muy bien tirar bombas sobre muchedumbres inocentes y pegar un tiro a los que gobiernan o a cualquier otra persona. Yo no me meto en eso. A lo mejor parece que estoy hablando de mí misma, y la verdad es que no

me preocupo por mí. Soy ya tan vieja que espero no recibir un balazo en los pocos días que me quedan. Pero antes de seguir adelante haga el favor de pensar un poco si tiene razón o no.

—No me parece justo que me adjudique usted ideas que puedo no tener. —Hyacinth se puso muy colorado, pero cada vez sentía más simpatía hacia *madame* Grandoni—. Habla como le parece de nuestras intenciones y métodos, pero ¡como si no empleáramos más que los que le gustaran a usted! —Sonrió y movió la cabeza dos o tres veces muy significativamente.

—¡A mí me gustaría no tener que ver ninguno! Me gusta que la gente cargue con sus problemas como yo he cargado con los míos. Y en cuanto a injusticia, ya ve si le tengo simpatía cuando vuelvo a decirle que no renuncie a nada, a nada. Voy a encargar que le traigan un poco de té —añadió, mientras salía de la habitación, y le presentaba la espalda, vieja, redonda y encorvada, y la cola del vestido, que arrastraba sobre la alfombra.

XVII

Mister Vetch le había advertido lo que podían hacerle las mujeres brillantes; fue sólo una palabra en boca del viejo violinista, pero la palabra había hecho su efecto. Paul Muniment también le había prevenido, y volvía a hacerlo una persona que no podía estar mejor situada para saberlo: todo había contribuido a aumentar su emoción durante aquellos tres días y le había hecho respirar más de prisa. Pero la emoción no le hacía temer consecuencias remotas; al contemplar el salón de la princesa Casamassima y respirar el aire increíblemente delicado y dulce que lo envolvía, tenía esperanzas de soportar la aventura mucho mejor de lo que la vieja señora parecía sospechar. Estuvo mirando las distintas sillas, canapés y otomanas que había en la habitación —decidido a sentarse en la más suntuosa— y escogió por fin una tapizada de brocado rosa y con las patas y el respaldo como si fueran de oro puro. Se quedó allí sentado, muy quieto, aunque con el corazón latiendo con más fuerza de lo normal, y volvió a pasar revista a todos los objetos. Los esplendores y sugerencias del apartamento del capitán Sholto resultaban pálidos ante el cuadro que tenía frente a él, y como la princesa no tuvo inconveniente en hacerle esperar veinte minutos (el criado entró durante la espera y dejó sobre una mesita un fulgurante servicio de té), Hyacinth tuvo tiempo de contar los innumerables *bibelots* que rodeaban a una mujer elegante (algunos ni siquiera imaginaba que existieran), y comprender que su belleza y originalidad revelaban no sólo mundos enteros de arte, sino refinamientos por parte de su dueña, complicaciones de espíritu y hasta casi, casi aterradoras honduras de temperamento.

Cuando por fin reapareció el criado y abrió la puerta con la amplitud necesaria para dar paso a una persona tan importante como su señora, la impaciencia de Hyacinth se hizo muy aguda. Era algo muy parecido al sentimiento que experimentaba cuando estaba en el teatro y aguardaba la entrada en el escenario de una actriz famosa. En este caso, la actriz iba a dar una representación para él solo. Pasó todavía un momento antes de que llegara y, cuando entró, iba vestida con tanta sencillez —además de que podía verla de cuerpo entero—, que parecía una persona completamente distinta. Se le acercó de prisa, con cierto envaramiento y timidez, pero en la forma en que le dio la mano había un deseo evidente de mostrarse natural. Podía haber sido otra persona, pero esa persona tenía una belleza aun más radiante; la hermosura de su cara brillaba ante él como para disipar cualquier duda o desconcierto que sobre la realidad de la visión hubiera podido dejarle la entrevista anterior. Y en presencia de su peculiar y extraordinaria gracia, no habría podido decir si era su orgullo o su amabilidad lo que más le chocaba.

—Le he hecho esperar mucho tiempo, pero generalmente mi salón no suele parecer un mal sitio; hay varias cosas que mirar, ya se habrá dado cuenta. Allí, en aquel lado, por ejemplo, hay una colección de miniaturas bastante curiosa.

Hablaba de prisa y atropellada, como si comprendiera que la reunión podía resultar un poco rara, y tratara de encontrar en seguida, para conjurar el otro elemento, la nota que les permitiera sentirse a gusto. Se sentó también de prisa ante la mesita de té y le sirvió una taza, que le entregó sin preguntar si deseaba tomarla. Él la cogió con mano temblorosa, aunque no le apetecía nada; estaba demasiado nervioso para tragar el té, pero le parecía imposible rechazarlo. Cuando comentó que naturalmente había mirado ya todas las cosas, pero que harían falta horas enteras para apreciar semejantes tesoros, ella le preguntó si le gustaban las obras de arte, pero añadió inmediatamente que temía que no tuviera muchas ocasiones de verlas, si bien quedaba el recurso de las colecciones públicas, abiertas para todos. Él respondió con toda verdad que algunos de los ratos más felices de su vida los había pasado en el Museo Británico y en la Galería Nacional, cosa que pareció interesarle mucho y le hizo pedir que le expusiera su opinión sobre algunos cuadros y obras antiguas. Fue así como, en un espacio de tiempo que le pareció cortísimo, se encontró discutiendo sobre Baco y Ariadna y los mármoles Elgin con una de las mujeres más notables de Europa. Verdad que ella era la que más hablaba, pasando precipitadamente de una cosa a otra, haciendo preguntas sin esperar respuesta, dando opiniones y expresando sentimientos por medio de unas frases que él

no había oído nunca antes, y que le parecían iluminadoras y felices, como cuando preguntó si el arte, después de todo, no era más que una síntesis hecha en interés del placer, o cuando dijo que Inglaterra no le gustaba nada, pero que en cambio la quería muchísimo. A él no se le pasó por la cabeza que tales distingos pudieran ser pedantes. De repente, comentó:

—Me ha dicho *madame* Grandoni que vio a mi marido.

—¡Ah! ¿El caballero era su marido?

—¡Desgraciadamente! ¿Qué le parece?

—¡No puede parecerme nada! —dijo el pobre Hyacinth.

—Me gustaría decir lo mismo. Hace casi tres años que no le veo. Quería verme hoy, pero me negué.

—¡Ah! —exclamó asombrado, sin saber cómo recibir tan inesperada confidencia. Luego, como lo que sugiere la inexperiencia es a veces lo mejor, soltó lo que tenía en la cabeza—: La ha puesto muy nerviosa, claro.

Más tarde, cuando ya había salido de la casa, se asombraba de haberse atrevido a hacer una observación tan familiar.

Pero ella la acogió con una carcajada de sorpresa:

—¿Cómo lo sabe? —Antes de que tuviera tiempo de contestar, añadió—: Que lo diga, que lo diga de esa manera, me demuestra cuánta razón tuve al decirle que viniera. Dudaba, ¿sabe? Demuestra que entiende las cosas. Lo adiviné la otra noche en el teatro. De no haberlo hecho, no le habría llamado. Es posible que me equivoque, pero me gusta la gente que entiende lo que se le dice y también lo que no se le dice.

—No crea que entiendo demasiado; es posible que exagere —declaró honradamente Hyacinth.

—Confirma plenamente mi primera impresión —la princesa sonrió de una forma que mostraba que le divertía—. Vamos a descubrir los límites de su comprensión. *Estoy* terriblemente nerviosa. Pero se me pasará. ¿Cómo está su prima la modista? —preguntó de repente.

Y cuando Hyacinth dando informe de la pobre Pinnie, había dicho que, en lo que cabía, estaba relativamente bien, pero se encontraba vieja, cansada y sin mucho éxito, ella exclamó impaciente:

—¡Bueno, no es la única! —y volvió al tema anterior—. No es sólo la visita de mi marido —completamente inesperada— lo que me ha puesto nerviosa, sino la idea de que ahora que ha tenido la amabilidad de venir pueda pensar por qué tenía yo tanto empeño, y que hasta pueda parecerle insuficiente cualquier explicación que le dé.

—No necesito ninguna explicación —dijo Hyacinth con gran presencia de ánimo.

—Me encanta que lo diga, y voy a tomarle la palabra. Las explicaciones, generalmente, sólo sirven para poner peor las cosas. De todos modos, no quiero que crea, como podía haberlo hecho la otra noche, que deseo tratarle como si fuese únicamente un bicho raro.

—No me preocupa cómo me trate —sonrió.

Hubo un silencio más bien largo, y ella dijo después:

—Todo lo que le pido a mi marido es que me deje en paz. Pero no quiere. No quiere oponerme la misma indiferencia.

Hyacinth pensaba qué respuesta debía dar a un anuncio como ése, y le parecía que un mínimo de educación pedía que dijese como podía decir con entera convicción:

—Es que no debe de ser fácil sentirse indiferente con usted.

—¿Por qué no, si soy odiosa? *Puedo* serlo, no lo dude. Sin embargo, puedo decir honradamenre que con el príncipe he sido de lo más razonable, y que casi todos los errores, los graves, los que han estropeado el asunto proceden de él. Claro que puede objetarme que eso es lo que pretenden todas las mujeres que se equivocan en el matrimonio. Pero pregunte a *madame* Grandoni.

—Podría decirme que no es asunto mío.

—Sí, es verdad —volvió a reír la princesa—. Y tampoco sé por qué le doy la lata con mis preocupaciones domésticas; salvo que he estado preguntándome qué podría hacer yo para infundirle confianza, ya que ha mostrado tanta conmigo. Como esto de la separación de mi marido es lo que más me ha trastornado por haberse presentado tan de repente, lo he comentado, aunque el asunto es bien aburrido. Además, debería decirle que siento muy poco respeto por las distinciones de clase, a las que dan tanta importancia en este país. No hay duda de que en algunos aspectos son convenientes; pero cuando uno tiene algún motivo, alguna razón sensible para saltárselas, y no lo hace por cualquier superstición estúpida sobre el lugar que uno ocupa u ocupa el otro, entonces creo que es algo innoble. Además, siempre tiene uno derecho a no ser desgraciado. Me imagino que si es socialista tiene que estar de acuerdo conmigo; y en el caso de que el sentido de esas diferencias, que es la religión inglesa, haya podido borrarle toda noción (aunque cada vez estoy más segura de que es usted poco más británico que yo), en fin, si a pesar de su teórica democracia

pueden chocarle algunas de las aplicaciones que yo, que amo el credo, soy capaz de hacer con él, permítame decirle, sin esperar, que no vamos a entendernos y que sería mejor que nos separásemos antes de seguir adelante.

Hizo una pausa lo bastante larga para darle tiempo a Hyacinth a declarar que él no se asustaba fácilmente, y luego, nerviosa, empezó a hablar con ansiedad, como si eso la aliviara, y como si pensase que cuanto más hablara, menos extraño iba a resultar su encuentro, para acabar declarando que lo que ansiaba era conocer al *pueblo*, conocer a los que trabajaban, luchaban y sufrían, porque creía que eran la porción más interesante de la sociedad.

—¿Podría haber algo de peor gusto por mi parte que emprender una cosa así con la pretensión de hacerlo con mayor delicadeza o con maneras más finas? Si lo hago así, más vale que no me preocupe. Pero no puedo: me empujan, me obsesionan, me fascinan. Y eso es todo; en realidad muy sencillo: quiero conocerlos y quiero que usted me ayude.

—La ayudaré con mucho gusto y lo mejor que pueda dentro de mis humildes posibilidades. Pero va a llevarse una desilusión espantosa —dijo Hyacinth.

Le parecía muy raro que en el espacio de pocos días dos señoras de tan alto rango hubieran tenido ocasión de expresarle tan misterioso anhelo. No cabía duda de que soplaban sobre la aristocracia vientos de un cuadrante inesperado. De todos modos, aunque el entusiasmo que había puesto la princesa Casamassima recordaba mucho el expresado por *lady* Aurora, y aunque se sintiera inclinado a desanimarla como había hecho con la otra, la fuerza que la impulsaba se le antojaba una mezcla muy distinta a las tímidas, escrupulosas y acongojadas herejías de la amiga de Rose Muniment. El temperamento de las dos mujeres era tan distinto como lo era su aspecto y manera de comportarse, y eso hacía que su curiosidad resultase mucho más significativa.

—No me cabe la menor duda —respondió la presente investigadora—. No hay una sola cosa en el mundo con la que no me haya llevado una espantosa desilusión. Pero, desilusión por desilusión, prefiero ésta. No podrá convencerme nunca de que entre la gente de que hablo, el modo de ser, las pasiones y los motivos no son más naturales, más completos, más *naïfs*. Las clases elevadas son mortalmente *banales*. La ascendencia de mi marido se remonta al siglo V, y es el hombre más pesado de Europa. Mi matrimonio me condenó a vivir entre esa clase de gente. Si supiera las cosas que he tenido que aguantar, comprendería que cualquier mecánico inteligente (por supuesto no quiero conocer a ningún idiota) sería un agradable cambio. Con alguien tenía que empezar, ¿no? Pues por eso empecé con usted la otra noche.

Nada más haber dicho esas palabras la princesa trató de arreglarlo; se le notaba en la cara el error, pero a los ojos de Hyacinth su hermosura resultaba más noble y conmovedora que nunca.

—La única objeción que puedo hacerle individualmente es que no tiene nada de pueblo, hoy ni siquiera el traje. —Le miró de arriba abajo, y aquel reconocimiento le azoró—. Me hubiera gustado que viniese con la ropa de trabajo.

—¿Lo ve? Me mira como a un bicho raro —contestó él.

Quizá fue para hacerle cambiar de opinión por lo que al cabo de un momento empezó a hablar otra vez de sus asuntos domésticos. Debía saber quién era, a menos que no se lo hubiera dicho ya el capitán Sholto. Habló de su ascendencia, americana por parte de su madre e italiana por su padre, y de que había llevado una vida bohemia y errante, desde que era pequeña, en mil sitios distintos (siempre en Europa, no había estado nunca en América y sabía muy poco de ella, aunque tenía muchas ganas de cruzar el Atlántico), pero sobre todo en Roma. La habían casado por conveniencia, para lograr una fortuna y un nombre, y el resultado había sido tan malo como pudiera desearlo su peor enemigo. Sus padres habían muerto, por suerte para ellos, y no tenía a nadie excepto a *madame* Grandoni, que no era parienta pero la conocía desde pequeña, y se sentía unida a ella (¿cómo llamarlos?) por sus inquietos pero inocentes años. Y no es que hubiera sido nunca inocente; había tenido una educación desastrosa. Sin embargo, había conocido también algunas personas buenas, gente a la que respetaba, pero la única que se había quedado con ella era *madame* Grandoni. Estaba también expuesta a dejarla cualquier día; la princesa parecía dar a entender que su destino podía llevarla a dar algún paso que fuera una prueba demasiado dura para su vieja amiga. Le llevaría mucho tiempo explicarle todas las etapas que la habían conducido a su estado de ánimo actual: el descontento con muchos aspectos del orden social, la rebeldía contra la corrupción, el egoísmo, la iniquidad, la crueldad y la estupidez de quienes tenían en Europa la sartén por el mango. Si hubiese podido ver lo que era su vida, el *milieu* en que se había visto condenada a vivir durante años, la evolución de sus opiniones (a Hyacinth le entusiasmó que empleara ese término) le parecería absolutamente lógica. Se había visto humillada, ofendida y torturada; consideraba que era también una de las muchas personas a las que sólo una revolución podía poner en un estado tolerable. De todas maneras, conservaba cierto respeto por sí

misma, creía que podía acrecentarlo y no veía mejor forma de hacerlo que entregarse a algún esfuerzo que le hiciera olvidar sus propios problemas y comprender las inquietudes y esfuerzos de los demás. Hyacinth escuchaba al principio con asombro, poco después con una entrega total; la encontraba natural, expresiva, exquisitamente generosa y sincera. Después de pasar media hora con él había conseguido que la situación resultara completamente normal, y cualquiera que hubiese llegado en aquel momento no habría encontrado nada que le llevara a pensar que la amistad entre encuadernadores y princesas napolitanas no era algo que se presentaba todos los días en Londres.

Hyacinth había conocido a muchas mujeres que hablaban de sí mismas y de sus asuntos privados —temía que esa desagradable tendencia fuera una de las características del sexo—, pero no tardó en darse cuenta de que la gran señora que se molestaba en descubrir su alma ante él no era una charlatana; que más bien debía de ser todo lo contrario, una persona orgullosa, irónica, reservada, que en opinión de muchos podía pasar por poco agradable. Era probable que fuese caprichosa, pero el hecho de que sus simpatías y curiosidades pudieran ser un capricho no ofrecía a los ojos del joven ningún aspecto siniestro. ¿Por qué no había de ser un capricho noble e interesante, y por qué, en último caso, no iba a aprovechar él aquel rayo de luna que arrojaba en su camino? Debe advertirse también que distaba de comprender todo lo que decía; algunas de sus alusiones eran difíciles de interpretar y servían más que nada para mostrarle lo limitado que era su conocimiento de la realidad. Eso sucedía, sobre todo, al hablar de su vida en Italia, en las posesiones de su marido, y de sus relaciones con su familia, que consideraba le habían hecho un gran honor al permitirle entrar en su augusto círculo (poniendo al mal tiempo buena cara) después de haber revuelto cielo y tierra para impedir que ingresara en él. La posición que ocupaba entre aquella gente y lo que había tenido que sufrir por el ambiente familiar, sus opiniones y costumbres (aunque quedasen muy vagas para el oyente), era evidente que habían impreso en su alma un resentimiento y desprecio duraderos; y Hyacinth comprendía que la reacción y el deseo de venganza podían llevarla muy lejos, hacerla moderna, democrática y herética *à outrance*, y animarla a creer en Darwin, Spencer y todos los iconoclastas científicos o en el espíritu revolucionario. No necesitaba haber sido tan sensible ante los puntos débiles de la princesa, pues sospechaba que la pasión personal había tenido mucho que ver en la formación de sus puntos de vista. Pero esa deducción, en la que no había dureza, no hacía que dejara de parecerle una criatura dotada de los más sutiles elementos: brillante, delicada y complicada, pero complicada con algo divino.

Hasta después de haberse marchado no se dio cuenta de que le había hecho hablar, a pesar de hablar ella tanto. Dio un suspiro de alivio al ver que no había resultado tan bruto como podía esperarse; le había salvado aquel estremecimiento de interés y admiración que sentía, y que no se le había subido a la cabeza para empujarle a demostrar que en su pequeña escala él era también una persona notable, sino que le había tenido en un estado de ansiedad y de tensión consciente, como si el momento fuera de gran solemnidad, como si aquella iniciación resultara más formal que cualquiera de las que se practicaban en los más horrendos círculos clandestinos. Sí que había dicho más de lo que podía al preguntarle por sus afiliaciones «radicales»; había hablado como si el movimiento fuera algo vasto y maduro, cuando, en realidad, en lo que a él concernía y en lo que podía atestiguar por conocimiento personal, se limitaba a las horrorosas paredes empapeladas del cuartito del Sol y Luna. Se reprochaba haber tenido ese descuido, pero no por orgullo. Sentía miedo de desilusionarla demasiado, de hacerle decir: «Entonces, ¿a qué ha venido usted a verme si no tiene algo más interesante que enseñarme?», pregunta para la que sí tenía respuesta, pero que no podía contestar, pues no iba a decir que no era él quien había pedido ir ni que era ella quien tenía la culpa. Le importaba demasiado volver otra vez para decirlo. Sin embargo, cuando ella exclamó, cambiando de asunto como hacía siempre: «Me gustaría saber si volveré a verle», él contestó, con toda sinceridad, que le era casi imposible imaginar que algo tan maravilloso pudiera repetirse; que había momentos de felicidad que muchas personas no llegaban a conocer nunca y que otras sólo disfrutaban una vez. Luego dijo:

—Pero la verdad es que eso fue lo que sentí al despedirme de usted la otra noche en el teatro. Y, a pesar de todo, ¡aquí estoy!

—Sí, aquí está —dijo pensativa la princesa, como si la cosa fuera aún más grave y complicada de lo que había supuesto—. Yo no encuentro que haya nada que haga realmente inconcebible que vuelva a verle; pero lo que sí podría ocurrir es que no volviera a encontrarlo tan agradable. Quizá sea que la felicidad sólo llega una vez. De todas maneras, me marcho.

—Sí, claro, todo el mundo se va —dijo Hyacinth, a tono con el momento.

—¿*Usted* también, mister Robinson? —preguntó la princesa.

—Bueno, generalmente no. Pero es posible que este año pase tres o cuatro días en la costa. Me gustaría llevar a mi tía. Ya lo he hecho otras veces.

—¿Y salvo esos días estará trabajando siempre?

—Sí, pero comprenda que me gusta mi trabajo. Para un joven como yo es una bendición tenerlo.

—Y si no lo tuviera, ¿qué haría? ¿Se moriría de hambre?

—¡No!, no creo que me muriera de hambre —contestó convencido.

Pareció un poco disgustada, pero en seguida dijo:

—Me gustaría saber si iría a verme al campo, en cualquier sitio donde esté.

—¡Ah, estupendo! —exclamó Hyacinth casi sin aliento—. Es usted tan amable, que no sé qué hacer.

—No sea *banal*, por favor. Así son los demás. ¿De qué me sirve buscar algo espontáneo en otra parte si usted también se vuelve *banal*? Lo que pregunto es si iría.

En aquel momento no hubiera podido decir si se alzaba por los aires o caía de cabeza:

—Sí, creo que iría. No sé cómo podría hacerlo… habría varios obstáculos; pero a dondequiera que me llamase, iría.

—¿Quiere decir que no puede dejar su trabajo así como así? ¿Que podría perder el trabajo y se quedaría sin dinero y lo pasaría mal?

—Sí, habría pequeñas dificultades de esa clase. Ya ve que en la práctica aparecen toda suerte de obstáculos y complicaciones cuando se trata de que una persona como usted se haga amiga de otra persona como yo.

—Así es como me gusta que hable —dijo la princesa con una dulzura compasiva que a su visitante le pareció realmente sagrada—. Después de todo, tampoco sé dónde estaré. Tengo que hacer varias visitas estúpidas, y lo único que me consuela es pensar que voy a hacerles pegar un bote. Aquí todo el mundo cree que soy muy rara, y la verdad es que lo soy. Y podría serlo mucho más si usted me ayuda un poco. ¿Por qué no voy a tener yo mi encuadernador? De acompañante, ¿eh?… Sería de lo más *chic*. Podríamos divertirnos muchísimo, ¿no le parece? Llegará, llegará. De todas maneras, volveré a Londres en cuanto haya terminado con esa *corvée*. El próximo año estaré aquí. Entretanto no me olvide —dijo levantándose—. Acuérdese de que espero que me lleve a los suburbios, a sitios muy malos.

Por qué la imagen de esas escenas de miseria le iluminó la cara es más de lo que puede explicarse; pero le sonrió a Hyacinth (que era algo más bajo que ella) con todo su extraordinario esplendor. Luego, de forma igualmente inesperada, se refirió a lo que había dicho un momento antes:

—Me doy perfecta cuenta de los obstáculos que hay en la práctica, como usted dice; pero aunque no soy perseverante por naturaleza, y en realidad me desanimo fácilmente, no los creo insuperables. Existen por mi parte también, y si me ayuda a vencerlos, yo haré lo mismo con usted.

Esas palabras, repetidas una y otra vez en su interior, parecían prestarle alas, ayudarle a flotar y remontarse cuando salía aquella tarde de South Street. Tenía en casa una edición de las poesías de Tennyson, en un volumen, a dos columnas, y en un estado bastante aceptable, a pesar del mucho manejo. Lo deshizo aquella misma noche, y a la semana siguiente, en sus horas libres y en su pequeña habitación, con las herramientas que tenía en casa y un trozo de piel de Rusia azulado que había sacado del taller de Crook, se dedicó a encuadernar el libro con toda la perfección de que era capaz. Trabajó con entusiasmo, religiosamente, y logró una obra maestra de acabado, que tenía en tanta estima como *monsieur* Poupin cuando, pasada una semana, le enseñó el fruto de su trabajo. El viejo Crook dio también su aprobación, pero con menos entusiasmo, pues tenía demasiada vista para crear precedentes. Hyacinth llevó el volumen a South Street, como una oferta a la princesa, y con la esperanza de que estuviera todavía en Londres, en cuyo caso pediría al criado que se lo entregase, junto con una nota que había tardado en escribir toda la noche. Pero el majestuoso mayordomo que tenía a su cargo la casa, aunque salió a abrir la puerta, le miró como si lo hiciera desde un segundo piso, dejó sin vida sus proyectos y levantó ante él un muro ciego. La princesa estaba ausente desde hacía varios días; su representante tuvo la amabilidad de informar al joven de que había ido a un lugar lejano del país para visitar a un duque. Se ofreció a recogerlo e incluso a mandárselo, si el joven deseaba dejarlo, pero nuestro héroe sintió un miedo repentino a lanzar su humilde tributo al mundo ignoto y posiblemente frío de un círculo ducal. Decidió quedarse de momento con el paquetito; dijo que se lo daría cuando volviera a verla, y se marchó sin entregarlo. Más adelante pasó a ser una especie de vínculo material entre él y la princesa, y al cabo de tres meses ya casi no parecía que el primoroso libro friera un regalo de sus manos, sino que la más notable mujer de Europa fuera quien lo había puesto en ellas. Sensaciones e impresiones extrañas, momentos de gran felicidad, que en él casi siempre eran retrospectivos, se volvieron más bien míticos y legendarios; y aquella obra maestra que había hecho después de verla por última vez, bajo el calor inmediato de la emoción, se transformó en la prenda y prueba virtual, como si un fantasma al desvanecerse de la vista hubiera dejado una reliquia palpable.

XVIII

El asunto le afectaba sólo de un modo indirecto, pero puede importarle al lector saber que *madame* Grandoni, antes de hacer la visita al duque, concedió al príncipe Casamassima la entrevista privada que le había prometido en aquella triste tarde dominical. Salió furtivamente de casa después del almuerzo —una comida que bajo el techo de la princesa se servía a las doce al modo extranjero—, cruzó la sofocante soledad en que se transforma la zona en esa estación, y entró en el parque, donde la hierba ya estaba agostada y donde a nuestra vieja amiga le pareció que flotaba una bruma caliente, un *réchauffé* tibio e insulso de la típica niebla londinense. Se encontraron, como habían convenido, junto a la verja, y fueron a sentarse bajo los árboles, al lado del paseo de coches, entre una selva de sillas vacías, y sin nada que pudiera distraer su atención de los dos o tres jinetes que eran todo lo que quedaba de las cabalgadas de quince días antes, y cuya vana agitación sobre la silla ponía de relieve la desolada escena. Permanecieron allí cerca de una hora, aunque *madame* Grandoni, inclinada a interpretar favorablemente las cosas, no acababa de comprender que aquello sirviera de consuelo a su afligido compañero. No podía decirle nada que mejorara su situación, mientras estaba allí contemplando apesadumbrado una perspectiva, que el hecho de que no fuera domingo no parecía aliviar, y pensaba que al estar junto a ella podía sentirse algo más cerca de su mujer, tener la sensación de tocar algo que ella había tocado. Hubiera preferido que se resignase, pero estaba dispuesta a contribuir a aquella remota ilusión, a pesar de no aprobar la forma en que se había portado durante la última y más aguda crisis de la historia de sus complicadas relaciones con Christina. Se había portado como un niño mimado, un niño malo en plena rabieta; y su falta de dignidad y de juicio le había proporcionado a la princesa una ventaja, que había aprovechado al momento y pensaba conservar para siempre. No había sabido actuar como un hombre, había acudido a sus tíos (como si a ella le importaran algo sus tíos, por muy poderoso prelado que fuera uno de ellos), se había mostrado suspicaz y celoso en los momentos en que no tenía que serlo, momentos en los que el resentimiento de ella había sido justo y, sobre todo, se había hecho patente. No había sido lo bastante listo o lo bastante fuerte para hacer valer sus derechos, y había llevado la disputa a un terreno en el que su mujer era un combatiente demasiado cumplido para no obtener al menos una apariencia de victoria.

Madame Grandoni tenía también otra reflexión que hacerse mientras se prolongaba la entrevista con su desconsolado amigo. Era natural que se la hiciera, pues además de ser una persona lista y despierta había vivido siempre (durante sus años de Roma, los años viejos y queridos, aunque mezclados de amargura para ella) con artistas, arqueólogos y gentes curiosas, que tenían una charla amena, expresaban toda suerte de ideas y sabían jugar con ellas. Pensaba que aunque las cosas no hubieran alcanzado aquel punto culminante, la mente de Christina, activa, inquieta e irónica, con todas sus audacias e impaciencias, no podía haber aguantado mucho tiempo el aburrimiento mortal que era la compañía del príncipe. Al encontrarse con él, *madame* Grandoni había dicho:

—Por supuesto, lo primero que quieres saber es si te ha mandado algún mensaje. Pues no, querido amigo, debo decirte la verdad. Se lo pedí, pero ella asegura que no tiene absolutamente nada que decirte. Sabía que venía a verte, es decir, que no he venido *en cachette*. No le gusta que lo haga, pero acepta la necesidad por esta vez, ya que has cometido la equivocación, según ella cree, de venir otra vez. Anoche, después de recibir yo la nota, hablamos de ti unos cinco minutos, vamos, hablé yo por mi cuenta, y Christina tuvo la amabilidad de escuchar. Al final habló un poco, con perfecta calma y dando la impresión de ser la mujer más razonable del mundo. No me pidió que te lo repitiera, pero lo hago, ya que es lo único que puedo ofrecerte en sustitución del mensaje: «Trato de ocupar mi vida y mi mente, de crear intereses en la odiosa posición en que me encuentro; intento salir de mí misma, de mis pequeños disgustos y frustraciones, con ayuda de las escasas facultades que poseo. Después de todo, hay cosas más interesantes en el mundo, y espero dedicar mi atención a ellas. No me parece demasiado pedirle al príncipe que haga

por su parte el mismo esfuerzo… y que me deje tranquila». Ésas fueron las notables palabras de tu mujer, y son todo lo que puedo ofrecerte.

Después de haberlo dicho, *madame* Grandoni sintió verdadera pena; el príncipe se había puesto pálido y parecía desconcertado y herido. A ella le había parecido que podía ser una reprimenda saludable, pero se daba cuenta de que procediendo de su mujer resultaban crueles, y casi se sentía cruel ella misma por haberlas repetido. Equivalían a decirle que era una nulidad; claro que una nulidad que tampoco era un crimen, ni algo que él hiciera a propósito o que hubiera elegido. ¿En qué iba a ocuparse el príncipe, qué intereses podía crear y qué facultades, ¡santo cielo!, eran las que poseía? No daba más de sí que la cinta de su sombrero, y era tan ignorante como las sucias ovejas londinenses que pacían ante ellos. La expresión de su cara se hizo lastimosa; era como si midiera vagamente el insulto, como si lo sintiera más que comprenderlo, como si viera que no podía alegar incapacidad, pues con ello acabaría de favorecer a su mujer definitivamente. Miró a *madame* Grandoni, su cara se contrajo, y ella creyó que iba a echarse a llorar. Pero no dijo nada, quizá porque lo temía, y unos momentos de sufrimiento callado, en los que ella puso su mano sobre la del príncipe, fueron la única respuesta. La señora cambió de tema: le dijo que Inglaterra resultaba un país muy curioso en muchos aspectos; le ofreció información sobre sus posibles movimientos en verano y en otoño, que en los dos últimos días se habían aclarado un poco, pero el príncipe, por fin y como si no hubiera oído, preguntó por la identidad del joven que había entrado en la casa en el instante en que él se marchaba.

Madame Grandoni se arriesgó a decir la verdad:

—Era el encuadernador de la princesa.

—¿Su encuadernador? ¿Quieres decir uno de sus amantes?

—Pero ¿cómo puedes imaginarte así que vuelva a vivir contigo? —preguntó *madame* Grandoni como respuesta.

—¿Por qué le deja entrar entonces en el salón, le anuncian como si fuera un embajador y entra llevando en la mano un sombrero igual que el mío? ¿Dónde tenía los libros y las encuadernaciones? A *ella* no se lo diría —añadió, como si la declaración sirviera para justificarle.

—Ya te dije el otro día que hace estudios sobre el pueblo, sobre las clases bajas. El joven que viste es un estudio.

No pudo evitar soltar la risa al darle ese giro a su explicación, pero su broma no tuvo eco.

—Lo he pensado y repensado una y otra vez, pero cuanto más lo pienso menos lo entiendo. ¿Crees que está loca de remate? Debo advertirte que no me importa que lo esté.

—Yo creo que todos estamos locos de remate —dijo *madame* Grandoni—, pero la princesa no más que nosotros. No, es que tiene que probarlo todo; ahora está probando la democracia, y llega hasta donde sea en punto a radicalismo.

¡Santo Dio! —murmuró el joven—. ¿Y qué dicen aquí cuando ven al encuadernador?

—No le han visto y es posible que no lleguen a verle. Pero aunque le vean será lo mismo, porque aquí todo se perdona. Todo lo que piden es que una persona sea extraordinaria a su manera, lo mismo hombres que mujeres. Un encuadernador sirve igual que cualquier otra cosa.

El príncipe meditó un momento:

—Pero ¿cómo puede aguantar la porquería, el mal olor?

—No sé de qué estás hablando. Si te refieres al chico que viste en la casa (y puedo decirte de paso que no había estado allí nunca y que la princesa sólo le había visto una vez), si te refieres al encuadernador, no tiene nada de sucio, sobre todo lo que nosotros entendemos por sucio. Aquí la gente de esa clase no es como nuestros queridos romanos. Todo el mundo tiene una esponja más grande que tu cabeza; puedes contemplarlas en las tiendas.

—Están empapados de ginebra; tienen unas caras horribles, todas coloradas —opuso el príncipe, y luego preguntó—: Y si sólo le había visto una vez, ¿cómo puede presentarse así en el salón?

Su amiga le miró con cierta severidad.

—¡Haz el favor de creer al menos lo que digo, amigo mío! No olvides nunca que eso fue lo que acabó de estropear el asunto, tratar a una persona (y qué persona) como dando por sentado que miente. Christina tiene muchos defectos, pero no ése; por eso puedo yo vivir con ella. Estoy segura de que siempre dirá la verdad.

Al príncipe no podía resultarle agradable que le recordaran tan claramente su equivocación, y se sonrojó mientras hablaba *madame* Grandoni. Pero no admitió su error, y ella dudaba de que lo comprendiera. Con no poca solemnidad, como un hombre que tuviese aún mucho que decir, comentó:

—Hay cosas que más vale ocultar.

—Eso será si se tiene miedo. Christina nunca lo tiene. Te garantizo que es temible y la diversión de observarla, de ver cómo lleva adelante sus inspiraciones, como no resulta más fuerte que cualquier otra cosa, pierdo la paciencia con ella. Cuando no encanta, sólo puede exasperar. Pero, en lo que a ti se refiere, y ya que estás aquí y es posible que tarde en verte o que no vuelva a verte nunca (a mi edad, tengo ciento veinte años), puedo también darte la clave de algunos aspectos de la conducta de tu mujer. Puede que así te resulte un poco menos fantástica. En el fondo, muchas de las cosas que hace se deben a que está avergonzada de haberse casado contigo.

—¿Menos fantástica? —repitió el príncipe, asombrado.

—Puedes decirme que no hay mayor extravagancia o locura que eso. Pero sabes (y si no lo sabes no es porque no te lo haya dicho) que la princesa considera que, en la hora más negra de su vida, se vendió por un título y una fortuna. Eso le parece una frivolidad tan grande, que cree que en el resto de sus días no será nunca lo bastante seria para compensarlo.

—Sí, ya sé que pretende que la forzaron. ¿Y se considera muy seria ahora?

—El chico a quien viste el otro día sí lo cree —sonrió la señora—. Algunas veces lo llama por otro nombre: dice que se ha lanzado con apasionamiento a ser «moderna». Eso significa casi todas las cosas que tú y tu familia no sois.

—¡Sí, gracias a Dios, no somos nada de eso! *Dio mio, Dio mio!* —gimió el príncipe.

Estaba tan agotado por sus cavilaciones que se quedó sentado después de que su compañera, levantando su encorvada corpulencia, propusiera que diesen un paseo. No era malintencionada, pero se había dado cuenta de que siempre que estaba con el marido de Christina el curso de la conversación la llevaba, como ella decía, a darse un coscorrón contra él. Después de administrar esos pequeños sobresaltos viraba siempre en otra dirección y, como por fin el príncipe se había levantado y le ofrecía el brazo, trató de hablar otra vez de cosas que no pudieran amargarle. Le preguntó por la salud de sus tíos y si seguían con sus ocupaciones habituales, y él respondió con los detalles que le habían enseñado como de buena educación en tales casos; pero cuando a petición de ella habían vuelto a la puerta más próxima a South Street (no deseaba que pasara de allí), tenía ya preparada una pregunta a la que *madame* Grandoni no había dado pie:

—¿Entonces quién es y qué es ese capitán inglés? Se habla muchísimo de él.

—¿Ese capitán inglés?

—Godfrey Gerald Sholto, ya ves que sé mucho de él —dijo el príncipe, pronunciando con dificultad los nombres ingleses. Se habían parado junto a la puerta, al límite de Park Lane, y un par de coches de caballos se lanzaron sobre ellos por ambos lados.

—Eso ya me lo esperaba, y sé que en el fondo es el que más te ha preocupado —exclamó *madame* Grandoni con un suspiro—. Pero en realidad es el último de quien debes preocuparte. No cuenta absolutamente para nada.

—¿Por qué no cuenta para nada?

—No lo sé, sólo puedo decir que hay personas que no cuentan. Él ni siquiera lo piensa.

—¿Y por qué no si le recibe continuamente y le deja ir a dondequiera que ella vaya?

—A lo mejor es precisamente por eso. Cuando la gente le ofrece la oportunidad de cansarse de ellos, lo toma con mucha calma. En cualquier caso no necesitas sentir más celos de él que los que puedas sentir de mí. Es sólo una conveniencia, un *factótum* pero trabaja de balde.

—¿Entonces no está enamorado de ella?

—Naturalmente. No tiene ninguna esperanza.

—¡Pobre hombre! —exclamó el príncipe en tono lúgubre.

—Acepta la situación mejor que tú. Se entretiene —siguiendo la recomendación que he oído hacerle muchas veces— con otras mujeres.

—¡Qué bruto! Pero de todas formas la ve.

—¡Sí, pero ella no le ve a *él*! —rió *madame* Grandoni mientras se alejaba.

XIX

La bata rosa que Pinnie se había comprometido a hacer para Rose Muniment se transformó en Lomax Place en un objeto importantísimo, y le proporcionó a la pobre Amanda un tema siempre a mano para referirse a una de las grandes ocasiones de su vida; la visita que había hecho con *lady* Aurora a Belgrave Square, después de su encuentro en casa de Rosy. Le contó ese episodio a su compañero con todo detalle, repitiendo un millar de veces que la afabilidad de su señoría era superior a todo lo que pudiera esperarse. La grandeza de la casa de Belgrave Square aparecía en el recital como algo aplastante y fabuloso, a pesar de haber sido moderada por las fundas de lienzo moreno que cubrían los muebles, y por la desnudez de escaleras y salones, de donde se habían retirado los adornos.

—Si resulta tan noble cuando ellos están fuera, ¿qué podrá ser cuando estén todos juntos?

Pinnie se lo preguntaba, y sólo se permitía restringir su admiración en dos puntos, uno de los cuales era el estado de los guantes y las cintas del gorrito de *lady* Aurora. De no haber temido dar la impresión de que notaba el mal estado de esos objetos, habría sido feliz remendándolos un poco.

—Sólo con que viniera una vez por semana o cada quince días yo haría que tuviera el rango que le corresponde —decía Pinnie, que soñaba con una aguja que lanzaba destellos en servicio desinteresado de la aristocracia.

Decía también que su señoría se destrozaba la ropa en aquellas largas expediciones a Camberwell; por mucho que le ayudaran, tenía que llegar hecha jirones al final de aquella espantosa escalera, con una criatura enferma y rara (era demasiado anormal) que sólo pensaba en sus galas y se dedicaba a hablar de su cutis. Si deseaba color rosa tendría color rosa, pero Pinnie entendía que era casi un sacrilegio, como adornar un cadáver o disfrazar al gato. Ése era el segundo punto que dejaba helada a *miss* Pynsent; le costaba mucho trabajo comprender que su señoría concediera tanta importancia a unas personas tan agresivas. La chica era muy desgraciada, empinada en la cama como un monicaco, pero puesta en el lugar de su señoría habría encontrado algo más apropiado de que hablar mientras pasaban bajo aquellos apabullantes techos dorados. *Lady* Aurora, al ver lo asombrada que estaba, le había enseñado la casa entera, llevando ella misma la lámpara y diciéndole a una vieja que había allí (un ama de llaves de confianza, con cintas en el gorro, que habría echado a Pinnie a empujones si fuera posible empujar a uno con los ojos) que podían arreglarse muy bien sin ella. Si la bata rosa, en sus sucesivas etapas de desarrollo, llenaba de tal forma la salita (la preparación fue larguísima), y le prestaba una atmósfera rosada que hacía muchos años no se veía allí, era desde luego por estar asociada a *lady* Aurora, no por ir dedicada a su humilde amiga.

Un día, al llegar a casa Hyacinth, Pinnie le comunicó que su señoría había estado allí para verla, para dar su aprobación antes de los últimos toques. La modista dio a entender que en semejante ocasión la opinión de su señoría había sido más bien desquiciada, y que parecía tener ideas muy peregrinas sobre los bolsillos. ¿Qué falta le hacían a la señorita Muniment los bolsillos y qué podía meter en ellos? Pero sin duda alguna, *lady* Aurora había encontrado que la prenda sobrepasaba todo lo que podía esperarse, y había estado más amable que nunca, y quería averiguarlo todo sobre los que vivían en el «Plice»: pero no por meterse donde no la llamaban, como hacían algunas de aquellas condescendientes señoronas, sino como si la gente pobre fuera la elegante y como si tuviera miedo de que su curiosidad resultara «presuntuosa». Con la misma discreción había invitado a Amanda a que le contara toda su historia, y había expresado igual interés por las andanzas de su joven amigo.

—Dijo que tenías unas maneras encantadoras —se apresuró a comentar *miss* Pynsent—. Pero te juro por mi vida, Hyacinth Robinson, que no he pronunciado una sílaba que pudiera molestarte.

Era una aclaración heroica por parte de Pinnie, porque sabía de antemano la mirada que le echaría Hyacinth —fija, silenciosa y desesperada, como si la creyera capaz de chismorrear (con la idea de que sus revelaciones pudieran darle importancia) y de apelar a su máxima discreción para taparlo—. Los ojos de

Hyacinth parecían decirlo todo: «¿Cómo voy a creerte y cómo puedo demostrar que mientes? Estoy completamente desamparado, porque no puedo demostrarlo sin acudir a la persona ante quien tu incorregible tontería te habrá llevado a hablar más de la cuenta, a dejar escapar alguna indirecta misteriosa y que sirva de suplicio. Ya sabes que yo nunca llegaría a eso».

Pinnie padecía terriblemente al ver que lo pensaba, pero se exponía a menudo a que lo hiciera, porque no podía renunciar al placer, aún más agudo que la pena, de decir a Hyacinth que le apreciaban, que le admiraban y que, por aquellas «encantadoras maneras» que alababa *lady* Aurora, no les faltaba más que asombrarse, y esa clase de interés parecía significar siempre la sospecha de su secreto, algo que, cuando trataba de explicárselo, calificaba, sintiéndose por una parte ofendido, pero encontrando cierta dulzura, como de «asqueroso *attendrissement*». Cuando Pinnie le dijo que *lady* Aurora daba la impresión de estar algo sorprendida de que no hubiera ido a Belgrave Square para buscar los famosos libros, pensó que debía visitarla sin demora si quería conservar su reputación de hombre de mundo; y al mismo tiempo pensaba lo extraña que resultaba aquella nueva fase de su vida, que se había abierto tan de repente y de un día para otro: una fase en la que su compañía se había vuelto indispensable para dos señoras de alto copete, y en la que la oscuridad de su origen pasaba a ser una atracción más. Andaban buscándole una tras otra, y hasta buscaban a la pobre Pinnie como un medio de llegar a él; de forma que se divertía preguntándose si su destino sería realmente que fueran tras él, que la aristocracia, al encontrar una misteriosa afinidad (con el fino *flair* que poseía), se dedicara a salir a su encuentro para evitarle la molestia de buscarla él.

Fue a última hora del día (un anochecer de octubre), y encontró a *lady* Aurora en casa. Hyacinth había calculado mentalmente la hora en que se levantaría de la mesa; en su imaginación, y sin saber muy bien por qué, esa operación de «levantarse de la mesa» era algo característico de la nobleza. No sabía que la comida principal de *lady* Aurora consistía en unas migajas de pescado y una taza de té, servidas en una mesita de la desmantelada habitación de los desayunos. A Hyacinth le abrió la puerta la misma vieja envidiosa que Pinnie había descrito, que escuchó lo que decía, le condujo a través de la casa y le puso en presencia de su señoría sin despegar ni un momento los labios. *Lady* Aurora estaba sentada en la pequeña habitación, a la luz de un par de velas, e inmersa, al parecer, en una colección de papeles arrugados y libros de cuentas. Estaba haciendo números, consultando papeles, tomando notas; había tenido la cabeza apoyada en las manos, y la sedosa maraña de su pelo se resistió al esfuerzo que por alisarlo hizo al ver entrar al encuadernador. Sobre su colorada piel se notaban todavía las huellas de los dedos. Dijo en seguida:

—¡Ah!, ha venido por los libros, es muy amable.

Le condujo a toda prisa a otra habitación, a la que según dijo había mandado llevar los libros para que pudiera escogerlos. Aquella precipitación le hizo suponer al principio que deseaba que lo hiciera pronto y que se marchara lo antes posible; pero luego se dio cuenta de que la nerviosidad y la timidez de su señoría inducían siempre a uno a equivocarse. Lo que deseaba era que se quedase, quería hablar con él, y se había precipitado sobre los libros para ganar tiempo, serenarse un poco y poner en práctica un arte más sutil. Durante la media hora que permaneció allí, Hyacinth acabó convencido de lo que ya había supuesto en su encuentro anterior: que *lady* Aurora tenía mucho de santa. Con los libros se llevó una pequeña desilusión, aunque escogió tres o cuatro, todos los que podía llevar, y prometió volver por otros: denotaban que *lady* Aurora tenía un concepto muy limitado de la literatura francesa y un gusto más bien pueril. Había varios volúmenes de Lamartine y una serie de las memorias espurias de la marquesa de Créqui; pero el resto de la pequeña librería se componía principalmente de obras de Marmontel y de *madame* de Genlis, *Le Récit d'une Soeur*, y los cuentos de M. J. T., de Saint-Germain. Había varios miembros de una escuela muy moderna, realistas avanzados y enérgicos, de los que Hyacinth había oído hablar y en los que deseaba desde hacía tiempo poner sus manos; pero ninguno de ellos había ido a parar a la inocente colección de *lady* Aurora, aunque sí tenía dos de las novelas de Balzac; desgraciadamente eran las que el chico ya había leído varias veces.

De todas maneras notó algo muy agradable en los momentos que pasó en aquella enorme casa, oscura, vacía y fresca, donde de cuando en cuando aparecían muebles monumentales, que no estaban amontonados y mezclados como en casa de la princesa, y donde las fantásticas entonaciones de *lady* Aurora arrancaban ecos que le daban una sensación de privilegio, de tomar parte en un alboroto decente, sin presencias que le coartaran. Volvió a hablar de los pobres del sur de Londres y sobre todo de los Muniment; era evidente que el único defecto que les encontraba era no ser lo bastante pobres, no estar expuestos a peligros y privaciones contra las que ella pudiera tomar medidas. A Hyacinth le gustaba eso, pero habría deseado que hablara de algo más, no sabía muy bien de qué, a no ser que como Rose Muniment quisiera que hablase más de Inglefield. Cuando estaba con los pobres, no le importaba hablar de cosas referentes a su estado, algunas veces hasta le producía una extraña y violenta satisfacción, pero veía que cuando esas cosas se

discutían con los ricos el interés decaía fatalmente: los ricos no podían considerar la pobreza a la luz de la experiencia. Sus errores e ilusiones, el creer que habían captado la sensación de la pobreza y la suciedad, cuando no habían captado absolutamente nada, era algo que resultaba siempre más o menos irritante. A Hyacinth se le ocurrió pensar que si encontraba esa deficiencia en una persona de tan profunda conciencia como *lady* Aurora sería un asunto mucho más peliagudo todavía intentar hacer la luz para la princesa Casamassima.

Su anfitriona no aludió para nada a Pinnie, y él comprendió que quería colocarle al nivel de la gente que no expresa nunca aprobación o sorpresa ante la decencia o la buena educación de los respectivos parientes. Vio que le trataría siempre como a un caballero y que aunque él se mostrara desagradecido no pensaba darle a entender jamás que le había tratado así. No tendría ocasión de decirle, como le había dicho a la princesa, que le miraba como a un bicho raro; y tuvo en seguida la sensación de aprender mucho más de la vida, de percibir que había muy distintas maneras (lo que implicaba que existían muchas más) de ser una gran señora. La forma en que *lady* Aurora parecía querer hablar con él de los problemas de la pobreza y las reformas podía inducir a suponer que era un noble bondadoso (del tipo de lord Shaftesbury) que había dotado a muchos establecimientos de caridad y era conocido por la amplitud de sus puntos de vista en cuestiones filantrópicas. No olvidaba tampoco que Pinnie podía haberse ido de la lengua, haber hecho alguna insinuación sobre su esclarecido parentesco, mucho más de lo que confesaba al cantar las bondades de su señoría; pero se acordaba también de que él mismo había estado a punto de ser igualmente idiota al soltar aquel día una alusión a su maldito origen. En cualquier caso, estaba conmovido por la delicadeza con que se comportaba la hija del conde, tratándole como si fuera «uno de ellos», y pensaba que en el caso de que conociera su historia (estaba seguro de que podían pasar veinte años sin que diera a entender que la sabía), aquel matiz de cortesía, aquel tacto natural, que podían coexistir con una extraordinaria torpeza, ilustraban la «buena crianza» de que había oído hablar en las novelas que retrataban a la aristocracia. La única observación de *lady* Aurora que podía recordar remotamente que le miraba desde otra altura fue cuando le dijo amistosamente y con ganas de animarle:

—Supongo que uno de estos días se establecerá por su cuenta. Pero tampoco esa frase resultó tan paternalista que no pudiera contestar con una sonrisa, libre también de toda sombra de impertinencia:

—¡Huy, no! Eso sí que no lo haré nunca. Armaría un lío tremendo si intentara establecerme por mi cuenta. No tengo la menor disposición para esas cosas.

Lady Aurora pareció sorprendida:

—Lo comprendo; es que no le gusta, que no le gusta.

Vaciló, y él creyó que iba a decir que lo que no le gustaba era la idea de dedicarse tanto a un oficio; pero pudo detenerla a tiempo, antes de que le adjudicara una pretensión tan estúpida, y declarar que lo que quería decir era simplemente que su única facultad era la facultad de realizar su pequeño trabajo, fuera el que fuera, y de gustarle hacerlo con arte y bien, y de agradarle todavía más ganar su correspondiente dinero cuando lo había terminado. Su concepto del «negocio» o de prosperar en la vida no iba más allá.

—¡Ah, sí, me lo imagino! —exclamó su señoría.

Pero le miró con unos ojos que demostraban que la desconcertaba y que no le entendía en absoluto. Antes de marcharse le preguntó de repente (nada permitía suponerlo) qué pensaba del capitán Sholto, a quien había visto aquella noche en Audley Court. ¿No le parecía una persona muy extraña? Hyacinth asintió, y *lady* Aurora preguntó entonces, nerviosa y con verdadera ansiedad:

—¿No le parece que es realmente vulgar?

—¿Cómo voy a saberlo?

—Puede saberlo perfectamente, tan bien como cualquiera. Creo una lástima que ellos entablen amistad con personas así.

«Ellos», por supuesto, eran Paul Muniment y su hermana.

—¿Con una persona que puede resultar vulgar? —a Hyacinth le parecía que tal solicitud era algo exquisito—. Pero piense en la gente que conocen, piense en los que les rodean, piense en Audley Court entero.

—¿Las clases trabajadoras, los pobres, los desgraciados? Es que yo a *ellos* no les llamo vulgares —exclamó su señoría con cara radiante.

Hyacinth, que aquella noche estuvo mucho tiempo despierto, se reía solo en la cama, y sin malicia alguna, de pensar que tenía miedo de que él y sus amigos fueran a resultar contaminados por alguien que se codeaba con una princesa. Hasta llegaba a preguntarse si la princesa misma no le parecería a su señoría un poquito vulgar.

XX

No debe suponerse que sus relaciones con Millicent no se habían visto afectadas por el extraordinario incidente que le había rozado también a ella en el teatro. Todo el asunto le había causado gran impresión a la señorita de Pimlico; durante semanas enteras no volvió a verla sin que tuviera mucho que decir de él; y a pesar de que cultivaba el asombro ante tan descarados procedimientos, y no dejaba de decir que la princesa era una extranjera caradura y que cualquiera que tuviera cierta idea de lo que se hacía en Londres tendría cuidado de ponerse a buen recaudo, no era difícil ver que se alegraba mucho de haberse codeado en el teatro con una persona tan espléndida, y haber podido comprobar que la estimación que ella hacía de su amigo quedaba confirmada en tan altas esferas. Pretendía basar su baja opinión de la señora del palco en la afirmación que le había dado el capitán Sholto cuando estuvo con ella, información de la que daba distintas versiones en los distintos momentos, y que sólo coincidían en ser siempre adversas a la princesa. Hyacinth tenía muchas dudas sobre la indiscreción del capitán; le parecía anormal que hubiera sido indiscreto. *Era* poco normal —eso era verdad—, y podía haberle dicho a Millicent, que era capaz de freírle a preguntas, que su distinguida amiga estaba separada de su marido; en cuanto a todo lo demás, resultaba más probable que la chica hubiera dado rienda suelta a su imaginación, de la que ya había tenido frecuentes atisbos, y que actuaba bajo un impulso primitivo, medio infantil, medio plebeyo, de destrucción, el instinto de echar abajo lo que estaba por encima de ella, la inagotable energía que la haría ser tan efectiva en el caso de una revolución. Hyacinth no creía que Millicent fuera falsa, y le parecía una prueba de ingenuidad que inventara historias tan absurdas sobre una persona de quien sólo sabía que no le gustaba, y de la que no podía esperar estima ni reconocimiento alguno por su parte. Cuando la gente era realmente falsa, uno no sabía a qué atenerse y, en lo tocante a ese punto, no se podía acusar a la señorita Henning de dejarle a uno a oscuras. Sobre el capitán Sholto decía poco más, y no tenía intención de repetir el resto de su charla; afectaba un aire indiferente cuando Hyacinth se divertía devolviéndole la crítica que hacía de su nueva amistad trazando un retrato lo bastante ridículo de la que había hecho ella.

Él pretendía que la admiración de Sholto por la llamativa belleza del segundo piso era lo que había dado pie a todo el episodio: había convencido a la princesa para que simulara ser una revolucionaria deseosa de comunicarse con el agitador de arriba, y pasar así a ocupar el asiento del inocente jovencito. Al mismo tiempo, no pretendía ocultar que la señora del palco había querido seguir el juego; se conformaba con decir que eso no formaba parte del plan original, pero había sido la consecuencia —muy natural después de todo — de haber resultado mucho más atractivo de lo que pudiera suponerse. Describía con amenas variaciones su visita a South Street, consciente de que con su amiga de la infancia no sentiría nunca necesidad de explicar con más detalle esa clase de experiencias. Podía haberle hecho de entrada una escena de celos, pero había cosas que le aterrorizaban mucho más que eso, porque sus celos, con toda su violencia, su energía, y hasta cierta inconsecuencia y un endiablado humor que ponía en ellos, le divertían, hacían aumentar la naturalidad, la pasión y el valor que admiraba en ella. No necesitaba preocuparse de no herir la susceptibilidad de la señorita Henning; no habría podido decir hasta qué punto le quería, pero su cariño no podía alcanzar nunca ese grado de delicadeza, y sus relaciones estaban de antemano condenadas a ser un intercambio de golpes y coscorrones de ataques sarcásticos y mutuos *défis*. Millicent, en el fondo, le gustaba de un modo extraño, absurdo, pero le bastaba con atormentarla —tenía aguante de sobra— y no le hacía falta mimarla. No se le pasaba por la cabeza que la chica tuviera motivos fundados para sentir celos de la princesa; no se le ocurría nunca comparar los sentimientos que pudiera despertar en pechos tan opuestos ni los que el espectáculo de cualquiera de esas emociones pudiera encender en el suyo. Aunque no le faltaba su parte de presunción, se sentía incapaz de asociar mentalmente a una gran señora y a la explosiva chica de una tienda en todo tipo de disputa cuyo premio tuviera algo que ver con su persona. ¿Cómo iban a tener la más mínima cosa en común, aunque sólo fuera el deseo de tomar posesión de Hyacinth Robinson? Una

cosa que no le comunicó a Millicent, ni sentía ningún deseo de hacerlo, era el otro asunto de su peregrinación a Belgrave Square. Podía estar enamorado de la princesa (¿cómo calificar si no el asombro que le había producido?) y desde luego era imposible que sintiera una pasión por la pobre *lady* Aurora; sin embargo, le habría causado un dolor mucho mayor oír a Millicent poner de vuelta y media al ángel tutelar de Audley Court. Quizá la distinción radicara en que ella daba la impresión de no poder acercarse a la princesa, mientras que *lady* Aurora quedaba más a su alcance.

Después de haber estado en su casa, Hyacinth había perdido de vista al capitán Sholto, que no había vuelto a aparecer por el Sol y Luna, la pequeña taberna que presentaba ante el mundo un aspecto tan corriente, pero ofrecía en su parte trasera una seguridad tan insospechada que podía desafiar toda clase de maquinaciones. Era muy natural que en aquella época el capitán estuviera entregado a las diversiones propias de su clase; Hyacinth daba por sentado que si no andaba alrededor de la princesa, en aquella extraña posición que uno tenía esperanzas de llegar a aclarar algún día, estaría desafiando las olas en el mar del Norte o persiguiendo a los ciervos en los Highlands. El conocimiento que nuestro héroe tenía de la literatura ligera de su país le llevaba a pensar que en otoño la gente acomodada estaba por fuerza inmersa en una de esas dos ocupaciones. Si el capitán no dedicaba su atención a ninguna de las dos tenía que haber marchado a Albania o, por lo menos, a París. Afortunado capitán, pensaba Hyacinth, mientras le seguía con la imaginación a través de animados y exóticos episodios, y mientras sus incansables pies continuaban pateando, en las aburridas semanas de septiembre y octubre, los mismos pavimentos familiares de Soho, de Islington y Pentonville, y los caminos sinuosos y en mal estado que unen esos barrios obreros. Le había dicho a la princesa que algunas veces tenía vacaciones en esa época, y que era posible que acompañase a su respetable tía a pasar unos días en la costa; pero tal como habían ido las cosas, la hucha destinada a esa excursión estaba vacía. En aquellos momentos, Hyacinth tenía un sentido muy agudo de lo que era la falta de dinero, y se veía forzado a recordar que la agradable compañía de las mujeres era una llamada constante y directa al bolsillo. No sólo no tenía dinero sino que estaba entrampado, debía peniques y chelines, como quien dice, en todas partes, y la explicación de aquella falta de dinero tenía que buscarla, entre arrepentido y resignado, en las numerosas ocasiones en que no había podido mostrarse sin fondos, so pena de desilusionar a una señorita cuyas necesidades eran perentorias, y especialmente en el gran momento de su vida (podía llegar a serlo), cuando se dio cuenta de que uno no podía ir a visitar a una princesa como si se tratara de cualquier otra cosa. Por eso, aquel año no pidió a Crook la semana que otros hombres pedían —Eustache Poupin, que no se había movido de Londres desde su llegada, se lanzó aquel verano a lo desconocido británico, alentado por su brava mujer y con un billete de ida y vuelta a Worthing—, pero él no pedía la semana porque no sabía qué hacer con ella. La mejor manera de no gastar dinero, aunque desde luego no la mejor manera de hacerlo, seguía siendo encaminarse todos los días al viejo taller familiar y desastrado donde, a medida que los días se acortaban y noviembre ponía un aire más denso y le daba un tinte amarillento y lívido, la llama del gas, muchas veces encendida desde por la mañana, iluminaba aquella fealdad en la que las manos se esforzaban por sacar un poco de belleza; la fealdad de un interior sucio y cubierto de desperdicios, de unas paredes desconchadas, unas mesas llenas de manchas y tajos, unas ventanas que daban a una calle en que lloviznaba, y los brazos remangados, los chalecos sórdidos, los delantales tiznados, el olor a sudor, los hombros pacientes, obstinados e irritantes, y las inevitables caras vulgares y obtusas de sus compañeros de trabajo. Las relaciones de nuestro amigo con sus camaradas podían constituir por sí mismas un capítulo aparte, pero todo lo que puede decirse aquí de ellas es que aquel artesanillo listo de Lomax Place tenía a su manera una doble personalidad y que, aunque era mucho lo que vivía en el taller de Crookenden, aún era mucho más lo que vivía fuera de él. En aquel mundillo ajetreado, pegajoso, pastoso y de cuero, donde el salario y la cerveza eran los temas más importantes, hacía su papel de una forma que le destacaba como un tipo raro, pero capaz de mostrar también una rara ecuanimidad. No había logrado ganarse su puesto sin descubrir que el obrero británico, cuando está de buen humor, tiene una mano más bien pesada, y había tenido que soportar una serie de bromas que alcanzaban todos los grados de violencia. Durante el primer año, soñaba con rabia contenida y casi con lágrimas con el día venturoso en que le dejaran en paz, un día que con el tiempo llegó, porque siempre es una ventaja ser listo si uno sabe serlo bastante. Hyacinth lo era, y supo inventarse un *modus vivendi*, a propósito del cual *monsieur* Poupin le decía: *Enfin vous voilà ferme!* El mismo francés había sido terriblemente *éprouvé* al principio, había mostrado siempre una gran firmeza y opuesto a la grosería insular una dignidad refinada. Gracias a eso, el escenario de Soho era una exhibición diaria y borrosa de sombras, confinada a la parte pasiva de la vida, que no podía albergar ninguna realidad, o al menos ambición, como no fuera un número insuficiente de chelines el sábado por la noche, algunas reminiscencias ocasionales de un trabajo delicado, que podía haber sido más delicado todavía, y del empleo de la herramienta, en el que

se afanaba de no ser sobrepasado por nadie, salvo por el incomparable Eustache.

Una tarde de noviembre, después de haberse descargado con Pinnie de una considerable deuda, le quedaba todavía en el bolsillo una moneda de oro, una moneda que parecía ir bailando ante la perspectiva de una docena de empleos. Había salido a dar un paseo con la remota intención de llegar hasta Audley Court; y en medio de ese designio nebuloso que había enfriado un poco el aliento húmedo de las calles, que hacía que aquella noche los objetos aparecieran especialmente borrosos y los lugares especialmente distantes, estaba la idea de lo bonito que sería llevarle algo a Rose Muniment, que disfrutaba con un regalo de seis peniques, y a quien no le había ofrecido ningún obsequio desde hacía tiempo. Por fin, después de haber ido de un lado para otro, dudando entre la peregrinación a Lambeth y la posibilidad de asociar esas dos o tres horas a las que por una feliz casualidad pudiera tener libres Millicent Henning, se le ocurrió que si había que descuartizar la moneda lo más sencillo era cambiarla. Había ido a parar a la zona de Mayfair, en parte con la intención de atajar y en parte por instinto de defensa; cuando uno estaba expuesto a gastarse el dinero, era mejor meterse en un barrio como aquél, donde, a esas horas sobre todo, no había tiendas para encuadernadores. Pero la victoria de Hyacinth resultó imperfecta al ocurrírsele entrar en un bar para cambiar su oro por la correspondiente plata. Cuando era cuestión de entrar en uno de esos establecimientos, elegía a ser posible el más decente; no sabía nunca con quién podía encontrarse al otro lado de la puerta giratoria. Los que brillan a intervalos entre la oscuridad del barrio residencial que linda con Grosvenor Square participan del buen tono general de la vecindad, así que nuestro amigo no se sorprendió (había entrado en la parte designada como «bar privado») al ver que sólo había un cliente apoyado en el mostrador sobre el que, con mucha educación, había depositado su moneda para que se la cambiasen. Lo que sí le sorprendió, al levantar la vista, fue ver que el juerguista solitario era el capitán Godfrey Sholto.

—¡Vaya, querido muchacho, qué coincidencia tan grande! —exclamó el capitán—. ¡Para una vez que entro cada cinco años en un sitio como éste!

—Yo tampoco vengo mucho. Creía que estaba en Madagascar —dijo Hyacinth.

—¡Ah!, ¿porque no he ido al Sol y Luna? Bueno, he estado fuera constantemente. Y además… ¿comprendes lo que quiero decir? Debo tener un cuidado tremendo. Así es cómo puede uno seguir adelante, ¿no? Pero me atrevería a decir que no confías en mi discreción —rió Sholto—. ¿Qué haré para que lo entiendas? Mira, tómate un coñac con soda —añadió, como si eso pudiera contribuir a la comprensión de Hyacinth.

Daba la impresión de estar un poco nervioso y, si fuera posible imaginar semejante cosa de un personaje tan independiente y caprichoso, un poco avergonzado o molesto de que le hubieran encontrado en un sitio tan poco elegante. Sin embargo, no era en modo alguno menos elegante que el Sol y Luna. Esa vez estaba vestido como le correspondía, sin el hongo y la chaqueta vieja, y Hyacinth le miraba con pena, pensando lo que era capaz de hacer un buen sastre. A nuestro héroe le chocó más que nunca ver que era justo el tipo de hombre que, cuando iba por la calle mirando a la gente, él había contemplado con admiración y envidia, ese tipo de hombre que uno se dice para sus adentros que es un «señorito», y piensa que él y los que son de su especie tienen el mundo en el bolsillo. Sholto pidió por favor a la camarera que no tardara en preparar el coñac con soda, que Hyacinth había aceptado para hacer más fáciles las cosas: realmente eso debía de ser lo que haría un señorito. Y cuando el chico cogió el vaso del mostrador, el capitán daba la impresión de animarle a bebérselo pronto, y sonreía amable y divertido, como si la combinación de un vaso tan grande y un encuadernador tan pequeño fuera verdaderamente cómica. A pesar de la prisa, tuvo tiempo de preguntarle cómo había pasado el otoño y qué noticias tenía de Bloomsbury; luego preguntó por aquella gente tan alegre que vivía al otro lado del río:

—No puedo decirte la impresión que me hicieron… aquella tarde, ya sabes.

Después preguntó de repente y sin venir a cuento:

—¿Entonces estás decidido a pasarte aquí el invierno tranquilamente?

Hyacinth se quedó asombrado: no comprendía qué otra gran cosa podía esperar que hiciese; de momento no se dio cuenta de que eso era lo que se preguntaban los señoritos cuando volvían a verse después de su elegante dispersión, y que su amigo sólo era culpable de una inadvertencia momentánea. En realidad, el capitán no tardó en rehacerse:

—Claro que tú tienes tu trabajo y todas esas cosas.

En vista de que Hyacinth no acababa de tragarse de golpe el contenido de su enorme vaso, le preguntó si había oído algo de la princesa. El joven contestó que no sabía nada más que lo que el capitán tuviera la amabilidad de decirle; pero añadió que había ido a verla antes de que se marchara.

—¡Ah!, ¿fuiste? Hombre, eso está muy bien, estupendamente.

—Fui porque tuvo la amabilidad de escribirme para que lo hiciera.

—¡Ah!, ¿te escribió diciendo que fueras? —El capitán fijó en él sus ojos, incoloros—. ¿Sabes que eres un mortal endiabladamente privilegiado?

—Claro que lo sé. —Hyacinth se puso colorado y se sintió algo tonto.

La camarera, que había oído a aquella extraña pareja hablar de una princesa, con los codos apoyados en el mostrador, no apartaba la vista de él.

—¿Sabes que hay gente que daría la cabeza porque les escribiera diciéndoles que fueran?

—No me cabe la menor duda —Hyacinth buscó refugio en una carcajada que sonó menos natural de lo que hubiera deseado, al tiempo que se preguntaba si su interlocutor sería precisamente uno de ellos.

En ese caso, la camarera tenía motivos para estar asombrada; por muy convencido que estuviera de ser el hijo de lord Frederick Purvis, resultaba demasiado raro que alguien lo prefiriese —y nada menos que una princesa— al capitán Sholto. Si algo podía haber que aumentara en aquel momento su sensación de anormalidad, habría sido la forma indescriptiblemente caballeresca en que el capitán, como si tuviera con él toda suerte de secretos en común, comentó:

—Bueno, ya veo que sabes cómo tomarlo. Pero si mantienes correspondencia con ella, ¿cómo dices que sólo puedes tener noticias suyas a través de mí? Querido muchacho, yo no tengo correspondencia con ella. Podría parecerte natural que la tuviera, pero no la tengo.

Al ver que Hyacinth se reía de manera un poco ambigua, añadió:

—Pues tanto peor para mí. ¿Es eso lo que quieres decir?

Hyacinth dijo que él sólo había tenido una vez el honor de recibir una carta de la princesa, y que le había oído comentar que eso de escribir lo hacía de tarde en tarde; cuando le entraba el ataque, escribía a veces mucho, pero luego estaba meses enteros sin tocar una pluma.

—Ya me imagino lo que te dijo —comentó el capitán como hombre enterado—. Pues espera al próximo ataque. Anda por ahí, ¿sabes?, visitando un montón de grandes casas. Es una gran cosa estar con ella en cualquier sitio, una comedia inagotable.

Dijo luego que recordaba haber oído que había cogido o pensaba coger una casa en el campo algunos meses, y comentó también que si Hyacinth no quería terminar el coñac con soda podían marcharse. La sed de Hyacinth era muy superficial y, después de haber salido, el capitán, a modo de explicación por haberle encontrado en un bar (único intento que había hecho por aclararlo), dijo que cualquiera de sus amigos sabía que tenía la manía de andar por rincones extraños.

—Ya habrás comprendido que me gusta hacer exploraciones. Si no me dedicara a explorar nunca te habría conocido, ¿no es verdad? La chiquita que estaba allí era bastante mona, ¿eh? ¿Te fijaste que estaba muy bien de busto? Es una lástima que tengan siempre unas manos tan horrorosas.

Hyacinth, instintivamente, se había dirigido hacia el sur, pero Sholto, cogiéndole del brazo, le llevó en la otra dirección. El bar del que habían salido estaba próximo a una esquina, la doblaron, y el capitán tiró de él como si tuvieran prisa. Pero su prisa se vio frenada por la aparición de una mujer joven, que venía en la otra dirección y que volvió la esquina con tanta rapidez como ellos. En ese momento le dio un gran tirón a su amigo, pero no antes de que Hyacinth echara una ojeada a la cara de la chica —le pareció como un relámpago en la oscuridad— y exclamara sorprendido:

—¡Eh, Millicent!

Fue el grito espontáneo que se le escapó de los labios, mientras el capitán seguía adelante y preguntaba nada más:

—¿Qué pasa? ¿Quién es tu amiguita?

Hyacinth renunció a contestar, pero volvió a llamar a la señorita Henning por su nombre de pila, y en voz tan alta que la chica, que había pasado junto a ellos sin volver la cabeza, se vio obligada a pararse. Entonces vio que no se había equivocado, aunque Millicent no dijo nada. Estaba allí, mirándole con la cabeza muy alta, y se acercó a ella, soltándose del brazo de Sholto, que tardó un momento en reunirse con ellos. El corazón de Hyacinth se había puesto a palpitar a toda prisa; era mucho sobresalto que la chica apareciera allí justo en aquel momento. Pero cuando empezó a reírse, y a carcajadas, y a preguntarle por qué la miraba como si fuera un caballo encabritado, comprendió que, después de todo, no era nada extraordinario que dos personas que siempre andaban por las calles de Londres se encontraran por casualidad. Millicent nunca había ocultado que «trotaba» mucho por la noche para hacer algunos recados; y cuando una vez le había dicho que cuanto menos saliera a tomar el aire por la noche una chica respetable, mejor para ella, le había preguntado hasta qué punto creía que pretendía ser respetable, y le había dicho también que, si le regalaba una berlina o iba por lo menos a buscarla tres o cuatro veces a la semana en un coche de alquiler, le ayudaría muchísimo a conservar su dignidad social. Como Millicent sabía muy bien

darle la vuelta a la tortilla, se mostró igualmente asombrada y preguntó:

—¿Qué andáis buscando por aquí? Me apuesto lo que sea a que no es nada bueno.

—Buenas noches, señorita Henning. ¡Qué agradable sorpresa! —dijo el capitán, haciendo una cómica reverencia con el sombrero.

—¿Cómo está usted? —contestó Millicent, como si no le reconociera.

—¿Adonde ibas tan de prisa? ¿Qué estás haciendo? —preguntó Hyacinth, que estaba mirándolos a los dos.

—¡Anda! No he visto nunca una cosa semejante, y encima una persona como tú, que siempre anda de un lado a otro. Voy a ver a una amiga mía, a la doncella de una señora que vive en Curzon Street. ¿Tienes algo que decir?

—¡No diga nada, no diga nada! —intervino el capitán, aunque la chica no había vacilado ni un momento—. Yo, al menos, desapruebo la indiscreción. ¿Adonde no podrá ir una mujer bonita cuando se lanza con pie ligero a través de la oscuridad?

—Pero, bueno, ¿de qué está hablando? —preguntó la chica con mucha dignidad. Hablaba como si lamentara que no hubiera podido comprobarse que tenía el pie ligero.

—¿Con qué bendita misión, a qué secreto servicio? —rió el capitán.

—¡El secreto será usted! —gritó Millicent—. ¿Salen siempre de caza por parejas?

—Muy bien, daremos la vuelta y te acompañaremos hasta casa de tu amiga —dijo Hyacinth.

—Muy bien —contestó Millicent.

—Muy bien —añadió el capitán.

Los tres marcharon juntos en dirección a Curzon Street. Durante unos minutos fueron en silencio, aunque el capitán iba silbando, y Millicent le dijo de repente a Hyacinth:

—Todavía no me has dicho adonde ibais vosotros.

—Nos encontramos en ese bar —dijo el capitán—, y estábamos los dos tan avergonzados de habernos encontrado en un sitio semejante que salimos dando tumbos juntos y sin saber demasiado bien qué hacer de nuestras personas.

—Pues cuando sale conmigo dice que no puede aguantar esos sitios —declaró Millicent—. Me gustaría haber visto quién había allí.

—Pues está bastante bien —contestó el capitán—, y me dijo que se llamaba Georgiana.

—Yo entré para que me cambiaran una moneda —dijo Hyacinth, que notaba algo turbio en el ambiente y se alegraba de permitirse decir la verdad.

—¡A que te cambiaran el gorro de noche de tu abuela! Te recomiendo que procures conservar el dinero todo junto; no te sobra demasiado —exclamó Millicent.

—¿Y es ése el motivo de que estés engañándome? —saltó Hyacinth.

Había estado pensando mucho mientras andaban; alimentando y tratando al mismo tiempo de ahogar una sospecha. La idea de que le hubieran tomado el pelo le ponía pálido de rabia, pero pensaba que por suerte también podía darse alguna coincidencia, y que cometería un error tremendo si hacía una acusación sin fundamento. Fue más tarde cuando empezó a atar cabos y tuvo la impresión de que coincidían; de momento, y nada más haberlo dicho, casi sentía vergüenza de haber contestado tan de prisa a la indirecta de Millicent. Debía haber esperado siquiera a ver qué resultaba de Curzon Street.

La chica replicó inmediatamente, repitiendo: «¿Engañándote, engañándote?», burlándose y diciendo si era ésa la manera de zarandear a una mujer en público. Se había parado al borde de un cruce, y daba tales gritos que el chico se alegraba de estar en una calle apta para aparecer desierta a tales horas.

—Pues sí que eres tú bueno para hablar de engaños, cuando te basta que una mujer te mire desde un palco.

—No digas ni una palabra de *ella* —dijo el chico temblando.

—¿Y podrías decirme por qué no de «ella»? Me gustaría saberlo. Supongo que no pretenderás decir que es una mujer decente. —La risa de Millicent resonó en toda la silenciosa vecindad.

—Chico, ya sabe que has ido a verla —sonrió exquisitamente el capitán Sholto.

Hyacinth se volvió hacia él; se sentía a un mismo tiempo ofendido y desconcertado por el ambiguo papel que había desempeñado en un incidente que, si era posible exagerar, no podía tratarse como una cosa corriente:

—Por supuesto que he ido a casa de la princesa Casamassima, y gracias a usted. ¿Si es el que vino a buscarme y pedirme que fuera, el que me arrastró allí, va a reprochármelo ahora? ¿Quién demonios es usted, después de todo, y qué quiere de mí?

A Hyacinth se le amontonaban en la cabeza todas las cosas que había visto en el capitán, todo lo que le

asombraba, la fastidiaba y no conseguía entender. Aquella marea en alza borraba cuanto pudiera haberle seducido.

—Mira, chico, sea lo que sea, no soy un asno —dijo el caballero con imperturbable buen humor—. Yo no te reprocho nada. Sólo quería decir una palabrita para hacer las paces. Queridos amigos, queridos amigos… —puso la mano como acostumbraba sobre el hombro de Hyacinth y, con la otra en el corazón, se inclinó ante la chica con mucha galantería y cierto aire paternal—. Estoy decidido a que este equívoco absurdo termine como deben terminar todas las peleas entre enamorados.

Hyacinth se zafó de la mano del capitán y le dijo a Millicent:

—Tú no estás celosa de nadie. Lo único que pretendes es echarme tierra en los ojos.

La señorita Henning contestó a esa salida con una respuesta que prometía ser muy sabrosa, pero que el capitán barrió entre una profusión de protestas. Declaró que eran una pareja abominable y deliciosa, y dijo que le interesaba muchísimo ver que entre la gente de su clase las pasiones estaban siempre a flor de piel; estuvo a punto de echar al uno en brazos del otro, y acabó de redondear la cosa proponiendo que, para terminar sus pequeñas diferencias, se encaminaran juntos al *music-hall* del Pavilion, el lugar de diversión más próximo de la vecindad, y que dejaran en paz a la doncella de Curzon Street para que pudiera peinarle la peluca a su señora. Al lector, el capitán le ha sido presentado como un hombre cabal, y sin duda se verá que la calificación está justificada, al saber que acertó a presentar la idea bajo una luz tan atractiva, que sus compañeros se metieron con él en un coche de alquiler, y marcharon dando tumbos hacia el reino del placer, Hyacinth, sentado al borde del asiento y emparedado entre los dos. Tres o cuatro veces sintió que las orejas le ardían; pensaba que si había algo entre ellos era el momento de ponerlo en práctica a sus espaldas. Si la broma se hacía a costa suya, la tarde entera constituía una oportunidad para ellos, y esa idea hacía que la diversión resultara para él poco apasionante, a pesar de que el capitán tomó un gran palco privado y encargó que les subieran helados. A Hyacinth le importaba tan poco su pequeña pirámide rosa, que permitió a Millicent que se la comiera después de haber acabado la suya. De todas maneras, pensaba que si se ponía a hacer el tonto la tontería iba a ser de las grandes, y eso impidió que soltara lo que le venía continuamente a la boca, el impulso de preguntarle por qué diablos le había sacado con tanta prisa del bar, si no se había citado allí con Millicent. Ya sabemos que a los ojos de Hyacinth una de las virtudes de la señorita era no ser mentirosa, y se preguntaba si una chica podía cambiar así de un mes a otro. Eso era tomarlo con optimismo; pero, de todas maneras, antes de abandonar el Pavilion, tuvo un momento de inspiración, y comprendió lo que había querido decir *lady* Aurora al llamar vulgar al capitán Sholto.

XXI

Paul Muniment sufría ataques de silencio mientras los otros hablaban, pero en aquella ocasión llevaba media hora sin despegar los labios. Cuando hablaba, Hyacinth le escuchaba casi sin aliento y, cuando no decía nada, le miraba fijamente y escuchaba lo que decían los otros a través de lo que expresara su cara inocente. En el Sol y Luna, Muniment prestaba muy poca atención a su joven amigo, y no hacía nada que pudiera dar a entender que eran compinches. En algunos momentos Hyacinth comprendía que le ponía de mal humor ver la seriedad con que le contemplaba el inquieto encuadernador, incapaz de ocultarla a los otros. No sabía si por parte de Muniment eso obedecía a un sistema o si era prudencia calculada, o si se debía únicamente a la superior rudeza latente en su carácter que, sin intención de hacer daño, le llevaba a impacientarse con la palabrería. Palabrería en el Sol y Luna había muchísima; algunas noches, una ráfaga de imbecilidad parecía soplar sobre la asamblea, y uno sentía vergüenza de estar asociado a tanta estupidez flagrante y a tan patente vanidad. En esos momentos, todos, con dos o tres excepciones, se ponían a hacer el idiota, golpeaban la mesa, y repetían una y otra vez alguna frase sin sentido que parecía ser todo lo que tenían en la cabeza. Había hombres que se pasaban la noche diciendo: «Ésas fueron mis palabras en el mes de febrero último, y yo me aferró a lo que digo, me aferró a lo que digo»; y otros que preguntaban invariablemente a los reunidos: «¿Y qué diablos puedo hacer yo con diecisiete chelines, con diecisiete malditos chelines? ¿Qué puedo hacer con ellos, queréis decírmelo?», pregunta que, a decir verdad, solía recibir una grosera respuesta. Había otros que repetían hasta la saciedad que si no se hacía hoy habría que hacerlo mañana, y varios que proclamaban sin cesar que lo mejor era arrancar otra vez las verjas del parque, aunque sólo fuera por el gusto de levantarlas. Un zapatero bajito, con la cara cenicienta y los ojos colorados, aspecto que Hyacinth deploraba, se expresaba casi siempre con las mismas palabras: «Bueno, pero ¿lo tomamos en serio o no lo tomamos en serio?, eso es lo que quiero saber». Él lo tomaba muy en serio, pero esa era la única manera que tenía de demostrarlo. Tenía mucho en común (aunque siempre estuvieran discutiendo) con un hombre de cara enrojecida, rasgos borrosos y estentórea respiración, que se suponía entendía mucho de perros, tenía las manos gordas, y llevaba en el dedo índice una sortija grande de plata, que contenía pelo de alguien, que Hyacinth creía era el mechón arrancado a un perro. Tenía siempre el mismo estribillo: «Bueno, ¿y estamos a punto de morirnos de hambre o no estamos a punto de morirnos de hambre? Me gustaría saber lo que opinan los reunidos sobre esa cuestión».

Cuando el tono bajaba tanto, Paul Muniment se limitaba a silbar un poco, se recostaba con las manos en los bolsillos y contemplaba la mesa. Hyacinth creía a veces que estaba a punto de estallar y decirles a todos lo que pensaba de ellos, veía con toda claridad lo que se le pasaba por la cabeza, pero Muniment nunca llegaba a comprometer hasta ese punto su popularidad; la consideraba —se lo había dicho a su camarada— como arma demasiado valiosa, y se dedicaba a cultivar la paciencia, cosa que tenía la ventaja de enseñarle a uno que siempre era mejor pensar por su cuenta. En realidad, a Hyacinth le parecía que esa popularidad no era tan grande, y el único síntoma de error que había descubierto en su amigo era su tendencia a sobreestimarla. Muniment pensaba que muchos de sus colegas eran unos brutos, pero Hyacinth creía que él sabía mejor lo brutos que eran; y que ese concepto equivocado le servía a Paul de soporte para creer en su influencia, una influencia que sería más fuerte que la de ninguno el día en que se decidiera a ejercerla. Hyacinth deseaba que llegase ese día; estaba seguro de que hasta entonces no sabrían dónde estaban, y que aquello por lo que luchaban tan ciegamente y con tantos obstáculos, en una especie de eterna niebla intelectual, pasaría de la etapa de pura discusión, del puro deseo punzante y atormentador, a una realidad sólida y firme. A Muniment se le escuchaba unánimemente cuando hablaba, y cuando estaba ausente también se hablaba de él, y en general por medio de alusiones veladas y sobrentendidas; pero se sospechaba que veía más allá de lo que era necesario. Como dijo una noche uno de los más inveterados asistentes al club: con que un hombre pudiera ver hasta dónde llegaba al tirar un ladrillo, tenía bastante. Se creía que no

tenía ninguna queja personal que hacer, o quizá que si la tenía no quería hacerla, actitud que sólo podía encerrar el germen de un desapego latente. Hyacinth se daba cuenta de que él estaba también expuesto a sufrir esa misma acusación, pero no podía evitarlo; le habría resultado imposible comentar en el Sol y Luna, para demostrar que era sincero, el estado en que se encontraba su guardarropa o decir que hacía seis meses que no probaba ni un penique de *bacon*. Algunos miembros del club parecían disfrutar a perpetuidad del ocio involuntario: narrando sus peregrinaciones inútiles en busca de empleo, los desaires más crueles y las anécdotas más significativas de la insolencia con que eran recibidos. En algunos momentos a Hyacinth le hacían sentirse muy incómodo, pues comprendía que si llegara a quedarse sin trabajo sería únicamente culpa suya, y que tenía en sus manos una hermosa herramienta para ganarse el pan, en la que podía confiar plenamente. No dejaba de comprender tampoco que su posición en aquella pandilla de descontentos (sólo pequeña si se conocía el número de los reunidos pero grande por sus posibilidades, sus ramificaciones y alcances) era peculiar y distinguida: podía resultar favorable si desarrollaba la energía y seguridad que habían de ayudarle a hacer uso de ella. Tenía la íntima convicción —la prueba se palpaba en el aire, en la facilidad con que se movía en el Sol y Luna— de que Eustache Poupin se había dedicado por su cuenta a divulgar la historia de su origen y del desastrado fin de su madre; en consecuencia, como víctima de la infamia social, de las odiosas leyes, se suponía que la cuenta que tenía que saldar era más importante que la de otros. Era un revolucionario *ab ovo*, y eso servía para compensar sus elegantes corbatas y su sospechosa seguridad en pronunciar bien las haches (lo había hecho de un modo natural desde pequeño), además de poseer un tipo de manos que podría no resultar el más recomendable en un sistema de igualdad absoluta. A Poupin no le hablaba nunca del asunto, porque era demasiado lo que le debía al francés para reprocharle cualquier paso que hubiera dado con buena intención; por otra parte, su compañero de trabajo en el taller de Crook ya le había dicho, como anticipándose a que le acusara de indiscreto:

—Recuerda, hijo mío, que soy incapaz de descorrer cualquier velo que tú puedas preferir que permanezca echado sobre tu personalidad. Tu dignidad moral siempre estará a salvo conmigo. Pero recuerda también que entre los desheredados existe un lenguaje místico que no necesita pruebas, una masonería, una adivinación recíproca: pueden entenderse con medias palabras.

Con medias palabras le habían entendido a Hyacinth en Bloomsbury; pero había en él una delicadeza que le impedía aprovecharse de esa ventaja, de tratar de ganarse simpatías, no menos definidas por ser torpes y oscuras, como pasos para alcanzar el éxito. No deseaba ser un cabecilla porque su madre hubiera matado a su amante y muerto en la cárcel: esas circunstancias reclamaban seriedad, pero también imponían modestia. Cuando la reunión en el Sol y Luna estaba en su mejor momento, y su temple parecía realmente un anticipo de lo que formaba la base de todos sus cálculos —que el pueblo era sólo un león dormido, pero que respiraba ya más de prisa, empezaba a estirar los miembros y a afilar las garras—, en esos momentos, no poco escalofriantes a veces, Hyacinth esperaba la voz que le adjudicara el papel que debía desempeñar. Aspiraba a representarlo con brillantez, ofrecer un ejemplo —un ejemplo que incluso pudiera sobrevivirle— de consagración pura y juvenil. No se consideraba encargado de ofrecer las promesas o asumir las responsabilidades de un redentor, y tampoco sentía envidia del hombre a quien tocara llevar esa carga. Creía que Muniment podía llevarla, y su primer artículo de fe era que estaba dispuesto a sacrificarse para ayudarle a hacerlo lo mejor posible. Era entonces, en esas noches de vibración intensa, cuando esperaba la divina señal.

Durante el segundo invierno las señales llegaron con más frecuencia; la temporada había sido especialmente dura, y en aquel bajo mundo, en el que uno caminaba con el oído pegado al suelo, el rugido perpetuo y profundo de la miseria de Londres parecía subir y subir y formar ya el único murmullo de la vida. El aire turbio llegaba hasta allí en las chaquetas húmedas de los hombres silenciosos y se quedaba flotando en la atmósfera hasta fermentar en un vaho nauseabundo, entre el que se destacaban caras serias y feas, y donde hasta el olor fuerte de las pipas pasaba a ser un elemento más, que parecía decir con feroz obstinación que era todo lo que quedaba, que tenía que valer por el pan y la carne y la cerveza, por los zapatos, las sábanas y las pobres cosas que estaban en la casa de empeños, y por la chimenea que permanecía apagada en casa. A Hyacinth sus colegas le parecían entonces más sensatos, empapados de mayor riqueza de intenciones y alimentando malos deseos contra las clases satisfechas; y aunque todavía resultaba más popular el hombre que preguntaba más veces y sin que sirviera para nada: «¿Qué diablos puedo hacer con media libra?», en más de una ocasión nuestro héroe creyó ver con claridad que la revolución estaba por fin madura.

Esa sensación se hizo especialmente fuerte la noche a que he empezado a referirme, cuando Eustache Poupin se coló en el club y, como si se tratara de una gran noticia, anunció que aquella noche en el este de Londres había cuarenta mil hombres sin trabajo. Al ocupar su puesto, recorrió con sus ojos de extranjero y

las pupilas dilatadas todo el círculo de los reunidos: parecía dirigirse a cada uno de ellos individual y colectivamente a un mismo tiempo, como para hacer a todos responsables de escucharle. Debía la posición que ocupaba en el Sol y Luna a la brillantez con que representaba el papel de exiliado político, de ciudadano magnánimo e irreprochable sacado de la cama a medianoche, arrastrado lejos de su hogar, de sus personas queridas y de su profesión, y puesto en la frontera sin más que una chaqueta sobre los hombros. Poupin llevaba muchos años haciendo el mismo papel, pero no había perdido la aureola del proscrito ultrajado, y las apasionadas descripciones que hacía de la amargura del destierro resultaban conmovedoras hasta para quienes sabían lo bien que le había ido desde que estableció por primera vez sus lares en Lisson Trove. Se reconocía que pasaba toda suerte de sufrimientos por sus opiniones; y sus oyentes de Bloomsbury, que aun en sus horas de mayor furia se sentían británicos, no parecían haber hecho nunca la sutil reflexión, aunque hubieran hecho muchas otras, de que había cierta falta de tacto en apelar a su simpatía, como si fuera uno de ellos. Conseguía imponerse por la elocuencia con que daba a entender que si uno no había estado en la hermosa e incomparable Francia no merecía que se hablara de él, y acababa produciendo la impresión de que ese país tenía un encanto absolutamente sobrenatural. Muniment le había dicho una vez a Hyacinth que estaba seguro de que Poupin lamentaría muchísimo volver a su tierra (como podría hacer en cualquier momento, dada la indulgencia de la República, que extendía constantemente la amnistía a más partidarios de la Comuna), porque allí dejaría de ser un refugiado; y fuere como fuere, estaba claro que en Londres iba viento en popa, gracias a suponerse que sufría tanto por serlo.

—¿Por qué nos dice eso como si fuera algo chocante? ¿No lo sabemos y no lo hemos sabido siempre? Pero hace bien en decirlo; nos comportamos como si no lo supiéramos —dijo el señor Schinkel, el ebanista alemán que había presentado al capitán Sholto en el Sol y Luna.

Tenía el pelo grasiento y una cara larga, enfermiza y bondadosa; llevaba siempre un pañuelo sucio anudado al cuello, como si padeciera alguna dolencia local:

—Nos lo recuerda, y hace muy bien; pero vamos a olvidarlo dentro de media hora. No somos serios.

—*Pardon, pardon*, yo, por mi parte, no puedo admitirlo —replicó Poupin, golpeando repetidamente la mesa con los dedos—. Si no soy serio, no soy nada.

—¡Huy, no!, es usted algo —dijo el alemán mientras fumaba su monumental pipa con aire contemplativo—. Todos somos algo, pero de lo que no estoy tan seguro es de que seamos algo útil.

—Bueno, las cosas irían todavía peor sin nosotros. Yo preferiría estar aquí, en esta especie de pocilga, mejor que fuera —observó el hombre gordo que entendía de perros.

—Sí, claro que es muy agradable, sobre todo si se tiene una cerveza; pero no debe de ser tan agradable allá en los muelles, donde hay cincuenta mil personas muriéndose de hambre. Es una noche muy poco agradable —comentó el ebanista.

—¿Cómo podría ser peor? —preguntó Eustache Poupin, que miraba al alemán como si fuera responsable de lo que había dicho el gordo—. Es tan mala, que la imaginación retrocede, rechaza…

—¡Uf, no nos preocupamos de la imaginación! —declaró el gordo—. Lo que queremos es un cuerpo compacto y en orden de marcha.

—¿A qué llamas cuerpo compacto? —preguntó el zapatero de la cara cenicienta—. Me imagino que no será un cuerpo como el tuyo.

—Bueno, sé muy bien lo que quiero decir —contestó algo malhumorado el gordo.

—Eso es una gran cosa. A lo mejor, uno de estos días nos lo dices.

—Puede que lo veas antes de que llegue ese día —replicó el de la sortija de plata—. Quizá cuando lo veas te acuerdes.

—Bien, pero ya sabes que Schinkel dice que no lo vemos —prosiguió el zapatero, señalando con la cabeza al alemán, que seguía sacando nubes.

—¡Me importa un pito lo que diga nadie! —exclamó el aficionado a los perros, con la vista clavada en lo que tenía delante.

—Dicen que es un año malo, los imbéciles de los periódicos lo dicen —continuó el señor Schinkel, dirigiéndose a toda la asamblea—: Lo dicen a propósito, para dar la impresión de que existen cosas tales como años buenos. Yo les pregunto a ustedes: ¿algún caballero de los aquí presentes se ha encontrado nunca con algo semejante? El año bueno todavía está por venir: podría empezar esta noche, si queremos. Todo depende de que seamos serios durante unas horas. Pero eso es demasiado pedir. El señor Muniment está muy serio; cualquiera diría que está esperando la señal, pero no habla, no habla nunca cuando yo tengo ganas de oírle. Medita profundamente, de eso estoy seguro. Pero es casi tan malo pensar sin hablar como hablar sin pensarlo.

Hyacinth se admiraba siempre de la tranquilidad y frialdad con que se comportaba Muniment cuando la

atención del público estaba concentrada en él. Aquellas manifestaciones de curiosidad u hostilidad le hubieran puesto nerviosísimo. Cuando cierto número de gente, sobre todo la clase de gente que se reunía en el Sol y Luna, le miraba o le escuchaba al mismo tiempo siempre se ponía colorado y tartamudeaba, pensando que si no podía tener un millón de espectadores (cosa que le habría inspirado), prefería tener sólo dos o tres; encontraba que un grupo de veinte era algo francamente espantoso.

Muniment sonrió un momento con buen humor y, después de una pequeña vacilación, mirando al alemán y sólo a él, como si su observación valiera la pena, pero no importara que los otros entendieran la respuesta, dijo simplemente:

—Hoffendahl está en Londres.

—¿Hoffendahl? *Gott in Himmel!* —exclamó el ebanista, sacándose la pipa de la boca. Los dos hombres intercambiaron una mirada, y luego Schinkel añadió—: Eso me sorprende, *sehr*. ¿Está usted seguro?

Muniment siguió mirándole un rato:

—Si me quedo callado durante media hora con tantas ideas sugestivas revoloteando alrededor, le parece que hablo demasiado poco. Pero si abro la boca para decir tres palabras, parece pensar que hablo demasiado.

—No, no, todo lo contrario. Lo que quiero es que diga otras tres más. Si puede decirme que le ha visto, quedaré plenamente satisfecho.

—¡Hombre, eso ya lo suponía! ¿Usted cree que es la clase de individuo que un fulano dice que ha visto?

—Sí, cuando no le ha visto —dijo Eustache Poupin, que había estado escuchando.

Todo el mundo estaba atento.

—Depende del fulano a quien se lo diga. ¿Ni siquiera aquí? —preguntó el alemán.

—¡Uf aquí! —exclamó Muniment, en tono muy peculiar, y se puso a silbar otra vez por lo bajo.

—Ten cuidado, ten cuidado; vas a hacerme creer que no le has visto —intervino Poupin excitado.

—Eso es lo que quiero precisamente —dijo Muniment.

—*Nun*, ya entiendo —comentó el ebanista, que se llevó de nuevo la pipa a la boca, después de un intervalo casi tan trascendente como la parada de un vapor en mitad del océano.

—¿Aquí, aquí? —repetía indignado el zapatero—. Pues yo diría que es tan buen sitio como el que haya podido dejar. Puede asomarse y ver lo que piensa de él.

—Es un sitio del que podrían decirnos ahora algo —sugirió el gordo, que parecía haber estado esperando una oportunidad.

Antes de que el zapatero tuviera tiempo de darse cuenta del desafío, alguien preguntó con malos modos de qué diablos estaban hablando, y el señor Schinkel se encargó de contestar que hablaban de un hombre que había hecho lo que había hecho sólo por intercambiar con sus amigos unas cuantas ideas abstractas, por muy valiosas que fueran, en una respetable taberna.

—Entonces, ¿qué demonios ha hecho? —preguntó otro.

Muniment contestó que había pasado doce años en una cárcel de Prusia, y que todavía era, por lo tanto, persona muy interesante para la policía.

—¡Vaya pues si es a eso a lo que llaman ser muy útil, tengo que decir que prefiero la taberna! —gritó el zapatero, dirigiéndose a todos los reunidos y con un aire que a Hyacinth le pareció especialmente odioso.

—¡*Doch, doch*, sí que es útil! —observó el alemán con filosofía, entre sus humaredas amarillas.

—¿Quiere decir que no está preparado para una cosa así? —preguntó Muniment al zapatero.

—¿Preparado para qué? Yo creía que íbamos a hacer trizas esa clase de establecimientos; creía que era lo más importante de lo que íbamos a hacer.

—Lo harán mejor los que han estado dentro —dijo el alemán—. A no ser que se hayan podrido como el pescado que lleva mucho tiempo. Pero Hoffendahl está todavía muy entero.

—¡Ah, no! Nada de destrozos, nada de destrozar cualquier propiedad que tenga valor —dijo Muniment —. No hay sitios malos, lo único que hay son malas formas de usarlos. Queremos que sigan en pie, y hasta levantar unos pocos más; pero la diferencia es que ahora vamos a meter dentro a los que deben meterse.

—Ya lo entiendo: ese Griffin es uno de los que deben meterse —dijo el gordo señalando al zapatero.

—Yo creía que íbamos a cortarles la cabeza… a toda esa pimpante cuadrilla —comentó el señor Griffin desilusionado.

Entretanto, Eustache Poupin había empezado a ilustrar a los asistentes sobre la persona de Hoffendahl, uno de los más puros mártires de la causa, un hombre que había pasado por todo, que había sido marcado a fuego, torturado, casi desollado vivo, y al que sus carniceros no habían podido arrancar nunca los nombres que deseaban. ¿Era posible que no recordaran aquel asalto, tan bien combinado, que se había hecho a principios de los años sesenta y en cuatro ciudades del continente a un mismo tiempo, y que a pesar de

todos los intentos por ahogarlo —habían llegado a llevar directores y periodistas por ver si descubrían algo — había hecho más por la causa social que todo lo intentado hasta entonces?

—¿Y a costa de pasarlas él tan moradas como usted dice? —preguntó una voz con toda simplicidad.

Pero Poupin respondió que ése era uno de esos fallos que resultan más gloriosos que cualquier éxito. Muniment, por su parte, opinó que el asunto había quedado en agua de borrajas, pero que su verdadero valor estaba en que, a pesar de ser cuarenta personas (de uno y otro sexo) las que habían tomado parte, sólo habían cogido a una y sólo una había sufrido. Habían pescado a Hoffendahl, y había sufrido mucho, había sufrido por todos, pero desde ese punto de vista —la economía de material— había sido un éxito extraordinario.

—¿Saben lo que llamo yo a los otros? Los llamo malditos bribones —gritó el gordo.

Eustache Poupin, dirigiéndose a Muniment, expresó su esperanza de que no aprobara realmente esa solución, que no considerara que una economía de heroísmo podía ser una ventaja para cualquier causa. Si él estimaba la intentona de Hoffendahl era porque había sacudido más que ninguna otra cosa —excepto la Comuna, por supuesto—, desde la Revolución francesa, todo el podrido edificio del orden social, y porque el hecho de que las personas implicadas hubieran quedado impunes había producido a las clases depredadoras, a Europa entera, un estremecimiento que todavía no se les había pasado; pero él, por su parte, lamentaba que alguno de los compañeros de la víctima no se hubiera presentado e insistido en compartir con él sus torturas y su cautiverio.

—*C'aurait été d'un bel exemple!* —dijo el francés, y lo dijo con una mesura tan impresionante que hasta los que no podían entenderle comprendieron que estaba diciendo algo muy especial; mientras el ebanista observó que, puestos en el lugar de Hoffendahl, cualquiera hubiera hecho lo mismo. No le importaba si lo hacían por amor propio, pero podía asegurar que él mismo habría hecho lo mismo si se hubiese confiado en él y le hubiesen agarrado.

—Quiero que me lo aclaren todo primero; luego intervendré —dijo el gordo, que parecía creer que se esperaba que diera seguridades.

—Bueno, ¿y quién es el que tiene que aclararlo? Creo que es de eso de lo que estamos hablando —replicó su enemigo el zapatero.

—¿Un hermoso ejemplo, amigo? ¿Es ésa la idea que tiene de lo que es un hermoso ejemplo? —preguntó Muniment con su cara risueña a Poupin—. ¡Un hermoso ejemplo de estupidez! ¿Acaso sobra por ahí tanta gente capacitada?

—Capaz de grandeza de alma garantizo que no.

—Su grandeza de alma suele ser grandeza de desatinos. El primer deber de un hombre es no dejarse agarrar. Si quieres demostrar que eres capaz, ésa es la forma de hacerlo.

Al oírlo, Hyacinth sintió de repente ganas de hablar:

—Pero a alguno siempre tienen que cogerle, ¿no? ¿No han cogido siempre a alguien?

—¡Hombre!, podrían cogerte a ti, si te parece —dijo Muniment sin mirarle—. Si consiguen echarte mano haz lo que hizo Hoffendahl, y hazlo como la cosa más natural; pero si no te cogen, tu supremo deber, tu religión, es permanecer tranquilo y reservarte para otra ocasión. El mundo está lleno de bestias inmundas que me gustaría fueran llevadas a paletadas y por millares; pero siempre que se trate de personas honradas y de hombres valientes, me opongo a la idea de sacrificar a dos si puede bastar con uno.

—*Trop d'arithmétique, trop d'aritmétique!* ¡Eso es terriblemente inglés! —exclamó Poupin.

—Sin duda, sin duda; ¿qué otra cosa podría ser? Usted no compartirá nunca mi destino si tengo un destino y puedo evitarlo —dijo Muniment riéndose.

Poupin contempló asombrado su ruda alegría, como si pensara que los ingleses, además de calculadores, eran de poca sustancia:

—Si yo tengo que sufrir, confío en hacerlo por la humanidad doliente, pero también por Francia.

—¡Hombre! Yo espero que no tenga usted que padecer más por Francia —dijo el señor Griffin—. ¿No le ha servido de nada a ese insaciable país suyo todo lo que ha tenido que aguantar hasta ahora?

—Bueno, yo quisiera saber a qué ha venido Hoffendahl. Estoy seguro de que es muy amable por su parte pero ¿qué va a hacer por *nosotros*? Eso es lo que yo quiero saber —comentó en voz alta y en tono de argumentación un personaje que estaba al otro extremo de la mesa, en la parte opuesta al sitio que ocupaba Muniment.

Se llamaba Delancey y decía que estaba empleado en una fábrica de soda, pero Hyacinth tenía la sospecha de que era peluquero; sospecha basada en el alto y lustroso rizo que coronaba su gran cabeza, y en la forma de colocarse detrás de la oreja, como si se tratara del peine de un barbero, el lápiz que empleaba para anotar cuidadosamente lo que se discutía en el Sol y Luna. Expresaba sus opiniones con frecuencia y

con claridad; tenía unos ojos acuosos (Muniment decía que eran también de soda), y aversión personal a un lord. Quería cambiarlo todo menos la religión, con la que estaba de acuerdo.

Muniment contestó que de momento no podía decir a qué había venido a Inglaterra el revolucionario alemán, pero que esperaba dar alguna información sobre el asunto la próxima vez que se reunieran. Estaba seguro de que Hoffendahl no había venido sólo por venir, y se atrevía a afirmar que no pasaría mucho tiempo antes de que sintieran el impulso que había dado a la causa que todos defendían. Era un hombre de gran experiencia, a quien sería muy útil consultar. Si en aquel momento y en aquel lugar existía algún camino para ellos, era seguro que lo conocía.

—Estoy totalmente de acuerdo con la mayoría de vosotros, al menos me lo parece —dijo Muniment con la naturalidad y alegría acostumbradas—; estoy de acuerdo en que ha llegado el momento de poner manos a la obra y llevarla adelante. Estoy totalmente de acuerdo en que el estado de cosas actual —hizo una pausa, y continuó en el mismo tono amable— es algo infernal e infame.

Distintas demostraciones acogieron sus palabras: había quien decía que si el alemán quería aparecer por allí y fumarse una pipa con ellos, se alegrarían mucho de verle, y quizá pudiera enseñarles las señales que le había dejado el potro; mientras otros afirmaban que no necesitaban ya más consejos, que les habían dado consejos suficientes para trastornarle el estómago a un burro. Lo que deseaban era demostrar su fuerza, sin perder más tiempo en palabras; servir para algo o para alguien; echarse a la calle y cargarse pronto algo, mejor aquella misma noche. Mientras estaban allí hablando, había en Londres medio millón de personas que no sabían de dónde iban a lograr comida al día siguiente; que lo que ansiaban hacer, a menos que fueran sólo una colección de viejas remilgadas, era decirles dónde podían cogerla y entregársela a manos llenas. Hyacinth escuchaba, con la atención dividida, lo que repetían de un lado y de otro; aquella noche había verdadera emoción, un latido febril en la trasera del Sol y Luna, y se sentía contagiado por los incitantes planes. Pero su pensamiento seguía una dirección propia; quería saber lo que se reservaba Muniment (Paul no hacía más que jugar con la concurrencia), y su imaginación, espoleada por la idea de conocer al heroico Hoffendahl, y por la discusión de si debía hacerse frente al destino o tratar de escapar de él, se había lanzado a inventar posibles peligros y a pensar qué haría él en el caso de verse obligado a pagar por todos. Las opiniones expresadas en voz alta, contradictorias e inútiles, continuaban en torno a él, pero lo único que veía claro era que la concurrencia se mostraba cada vez más favorable a asaltar las panaderías, y que se hacían también numerosas referencias a las carnicerías, tiendas de comestibles y hasta a los vendedores de pescado. Se encontraba en un estado de gran exaltación interna, con un inmenso deseo de encontrarse cara a cara con el incomparable Hoffendahl, escuchar su voz y tocar su mutilada mano. Estaba dispuesto a todo: sabía que por su parte, aunque no fuera con abundancia, tenía asegurados el desayuno y la cena, y que sus colegas se mostraban quizá más brutos y torpes que nunca; pero el aliento de la pasión popular le había calentado el rostro y el corazón, y tenía la impresión de ver, enormemente magnificada, toda la monstruosidad de las grandes úlceras y males de Londres: la miseria endémica, gritando eternamente y en vano desde la oscuridad, y al lado de graneros, tesoros y lugares de placer donde reinaba una vergonzosa abundancia. En tal estado de ánimo, le parecía que sobraban las razones: los hechos resultaban tan imperativos como los gritos de uno que se está ahogando, pues mientras la pedantería ganaba tiempo, el hambre y la angustia lo hacían también. Sabía que Muniment no era partidario de esperar, que consideraba llegado el día de rectificar por la fuerza todas aquellas horribles desigualdades. En la última conversación que habían tenido, su juicioso amigo le había dado una garantía más definitiva que nunca de ponerle en el grupo de acción inmediata, aunque había vuelto a decir una vez más que esa fórmula con la que el encuadernador parecía estar tan encaprichado no pasaba de ser pura jerigonza. Él detestaba esa clase de etiquetas pretenciosas; las consideraba aptas para políticos y aficionados. Pero, por otra parte, había dejado bien claro que lo que tenían que hacer era aterrorizar a la sociedad, aterrorizarla de veras; hacerle creer que las clases hasta entonces estafadas se habían unido por fin, que habían comprendido que si se mantenían estrechamente unidas serían irresistibles. Muniment tampoco se había molestado en ocultar que la verdad era que no estaban unidas y que no habían comprendido nada. Pero, de todas maneras, a la sociedad se le podía asustar, y todo buen susto que se le diera era una baza a favor del pueblo. Si Hyacinth hubiera necesitado aquella noche alguna prueba para alimentar una fe que superase a la lógica la habría encontrado en la tranquila declaración de su amigo; pero esas palabras le llevaban más que nada a preguntarse qué tendría Paul en la cabeza en aquel momento. No tomaba parte en las vociferaciones; había llamado a Schinkel para que fuera a sentarse a su lado, y los dos parecían conversar con toda tranquilidad, mientras la atmósfera se cargaba por momentos, las frases subversivas subían de tono, y la sofocación de las caras alcanzaba grados increíbles. Lo que Hyacinth más deseaba saber era por qué Muniment no le había dicho que Hoffendahl estaba en Londres y que le había visto; porque de que le

había visto, a pesar de que eludiera la pregunta de Schinkel, estaba más que seguro. Pensaba pedirle información más tarde, y entretanto, sin resentimiento, pero con cierto dolor, esperaba que Muniment llegara a tratarle con más confianza. Si había algún secreto con respecto a Hoffendahl —y era seguro que lo había—, Muniment, con toda razón, y aunque hubiera soltado el anuncio de su llegada para producir efecto, no tenía intención de comunicar todo lo que sabía a los que participaban en aquel guirigay; pero si había algo más que exigiese una entrega silenciosa, Hyacinth esperaba con impaciencia que se le permitiera demostrar esa superioridad. Estaba nervioso y tenía calor; se levantó de repente y, cruzando el tortuoso y grasiento pasadizo que comunicaba con el mundo exterior, salió a la calle. Caía aguanieve y el aire era sucio, pero le refrescaba, y se quedó delante del bar, fumando otra pipa. Figuras con las ropas mojadas y sucias entraban y salían, y un hombre andrajoso, con la cara muy colorada, a quien habían echado fuera, gimoteaba bajo el brillo crudo de la hilera de luces. Relucía el agua en los charcos y la calle, bordeada de casas bajas y renegridas, se alargaba a derecha e izquierda en medio de la cellisca e iba a perderse en la enorme y trágica ciudad, donde una inmensa miseria se agazapaba bajo la sucia noche, agorera, monstruosamente quieta, aullando tan sólo en el reñidero de gallos que tenía detrás de él. ¿Y qué podía hacer? ¿Qué oportunidad podía presentarse? Los desatinos y opiniones encontradas que había escuchado hacían que el desamparo de todos fuera aún mayor. Si algo deseaba mientras estaba allí era que toda aquella gente engañada y enardecida saliera con Muniment a la cabeza, inundara aquel mundo dormido, sacara a millares de miserables de sus suburbios y madrigueras, se derramara por los barrios egoístas, y con un tremendo alarido de hambre despertara a los hartos indiferentes y los hiciera caer de terror. Anduvo por allí un cuarto de hora y, en vista de que ese gran momento no llevaba trazas de empezar, entró de nuevo en el ruidoso club, atormentado por descubrir qué idea mejor que aquella tan mala (pero que tenía al menos el mérito de ser una idea) podía albergar Muniment en su privilegiado cerebro.

Al volver a entrar vio que la reunión se disolvía en pleno desorden o, por lo menos, en plena confusión, y que aquella noche no habría ningún intento organizado de ir a salvar a cualquier número de víctimas. Todos los hombres estaban ya en pie y se disponían a salir entre empujones de trajes raídos, arrastre de sillas y bancos, ahorrativa disminución del gas, y disgusto y resignación más o menos acusados. Nada más entrar Hyacinth, Delancey, el presunto peluquero, se encaramó en una silla, en el último extremo de la habitación, y lanzó a voces una acusación que hizo detenerse a todo el mundo y mirarle con asombro.

—Bueno, antes de que nos separemos, quiero decirles a todos lo que más me choca. No hay un solo hombre en todo este bendito grupo que no sienta miedo por su pellejo: ¡miedo, miedo, miedo! Yo iría adonde fuese con cualquiera, pero ¡por Dios!, que no hay otro, según veo. No hay un solo hijo de madre entre vosotros que se atreva a poner en peligro sus preciosos huesos.

Aquel pequeño discurso le sentó a Hyacinth como si le hubieran dado una bofetada en la cara: le parecía dirigido personalmente a él, como si le hubieran tirado un taburete o una bota con los clavos de punta. La habitación parecía dar vueltas, subir y bajar al tiempo que oía una explosión de carcajadas y burlas, gritos de «¡Orden, orden!», unas palabras más claras de Muniment: «¡Delancey, te digo que bajes!»; la voz de Eustache Poupin, que gritaba «*Vous insultez le peuple!, vous insultez le peuple!*» y otras respuestas que no se distinguían por su refinamiento. Un momento después, él mismo se encontró subido en otra silla frente al barbero, y vio que la conmoción de la asamblea ante aquel despliegue repentino se había transformado en expectación casi humorística. Era la primera vez que pedía que le prestaran atención, cosa que le fue concedida en el acto. Estaba seguro de hallarse palidísimo, y hasta temía que advirtiesen que temblaba. Su única esperanza era no resultar ridículo cuando dijo:

—Creo que no hace bien en decir eso. Hay otros además de él. En cualquier caso, quiero hablar por mí mismo; puede que venga bien; no puedo evitarlo. Yo no tengo miedo; estoy seguro de no tenerlo. Estoy dispuesto a hacer cualquier cosa que sirva para algo, cualquier cosa, cualquier cosa… y maldito lo que me importa. No considero en modo alguno que mis huesos sean preciosos, comparados con otras cosas. Si se está seguro, no se tiene miedo, y si a uno le acusan, ¿por qué no va a decirlo?

Le parecía que había estado hablando mucho tiempo y cuando terminó apenas entendía lo que pasaba. En un instante se vio en el suelo, casi entre los pies de los otros; avasallado entre muestras de aplauso y familiaridad, risas y burlas, empujones y golpes en las costillas. Se sintió también oprimido contra el pecho de Eustache Poupin, que parecía estar sollozando, mientras oía decir a otro: «¿Habéis oído al endiablado golfillo, más valiente que un león?». Hubo una propuesta de desafío entre él y Delancey, que sin saber cómo no se llevó a cabo y, pasados cinco minutos, el club estaba desocupado, pero no para formarse otra vez fuera en procesión revolucionaria. Paul Muniment le había cogido por su cuenta y decía: «Voy a pedirte que te quedes, pequeño malhechor, que me maten si esperaba verte discurseando».

Muniment se quedó, y *monsieur* Poupin y Schinkel también se entretuvieron un poco, poniéndose los

abrigos, en la penumbra de una luz de gas superviviente, y en aquel ambiente falto de ventilación, que parecía ser característico de todas las reuniones de Bloomsbury.

—Te juro que te creo valiente —dijo Muniment, que le miraba con cara seria.

—Crees que es un farol, amor propio, como dice Schinkel. Pero no lo es. —Hyacinth preguntó—: Pero por Dios, ¿por qué no hacemos algo?

—¡Huy, hijo mío!, ¿a quién se lo dices? —exclamó Eustache Poupin, con los brazos cruzados y aire desesperado.

—¿Qué entiendes por «hacemos»? —dijo Muniment.

—Todos nosotros. Hay muchísimos que están preparados.

—¿Preparados para qué? Si no hay nada que hacer…

Hyacinth se quedó pasmado:

—¿Y por qué diablos vienes aquí entonces?

—Estoy por decir que no vendré mucho. Es un sitio en el que uno siempre ha visto demasiado.

—Empiezo a preguntarme si yo no he visto demasiado en ti también —se aventuró a decir Hyacinth, mirando a su amigo.

—No digas eso. ¡Va a presentarnos a Hoffendahl! —exclamó Schinkel, que se quitó la pipa de la boca y la guardó en un estuche casi tan grande como el de un violín.

—¿Te gustaría ver al verdadero hombre, Robinson, o sea, lo verdaderamente importante? —preguntó Muniment, con la misma extraña seriedad.

—¿Lo verdaderamente importante? —Hyacinth miraba a sus compañeros uno tras otro.

—No lo has visto todavía, aunque creas que lo has visto.

—¿Y por qué no me lo has enseñado antes?

—Porque no te había visto nunca echando discursos. —Esas palabras sonaron más a broma.

—¡Vete a paseo con el discurso! Tenía confianza en ti.

—Claro, por eso he tenido tiempo.

—No vengas si no estás decidido, *mon petit* —dijo Poupin.

—¿Vais ahora a ver a Hoffendahl? ¿Es él el verdadero hombre?

—No lo pregones a voces. Quiere un perfecto caballero, y si tú no lo eres…

—¿Es verdad? ¿Iremos todos? —preguntó Hyacinth impaciente.

—Sí, estos dos están metidos en ello. No son muy juiciosos, pero sí buena gente —dijo Muniment, mirando a Poupin y a Schinkel.

—¿Eres tú, Muniment, lo verdaderamente importante?

Muniment fijó en él sus ojos:

—Sí, tú eres el cordero que necesita para el sacrificio. Está en la otra punta de Londres. Tenemos que coger un coche.

—Tranquilo, hijo mío, *me voici!* —Y Poupin condujo hacia afuera a su amigo.

Salieron todos del Sol y Luna y tardaron algo más de cinco minutos en encontrar el coche de cuatro ruedas que dignificaba y parecía dar mayor importancia a su proyecto. Después de haber entrado en él, Hyacinth se enteró que el «verdadero hombre» sólo estaría en Londres tres días; podía tener que salir huyendo a la mañana siguiente, y estaba acostumbrado a recibir visitas a las horas más intempestivas. Era ya casi medianoche; con la impaciencia y curiosidad que sentía, Hyacinth encontró el viaje interminable. Iba sentado al lado de Muniment, que le había pasado el brazo por los hombros, y le tuvo agarrado todo el tiempo, como si quisiera dar a entender que tenía una deuda pendiente. A Hyacinth le gustaba que lo hiciera, hasta que empezó a pensar si no querría tenerle seguro frente a posibles malos pensamientos. Todos acabaron sentados en silencio, mientras el coche daba tumbos a través de millas enteras de oscuridad y, cuando por fin paró, Hyacinth, con la falta de luz y la llovizna, ya no sabía ni dónde estaba.

Libro III

XXII

Hyacinth se levantó temprano, operación que le costó muy poco esfuerzo, pues apenas había pegado el ojo en toda la noche. Lo que vio desde la ventana le hizo vestirse todo lo de prisa que fuera posible a un joven que deseaba más que nunca que su aspecto no despertara extrañas ideas sobre él: un viejo jardín, con parterres que formaban curiosas figuras, y pequeños trozos de pradera que, a sus ojos de *cockney*, parecían fantásticamente verdes. En un extremo del jardín se alzaba un parapeto cubierto de musgo, que daba sobre un canal, foso o viejo estanque (no sabía cómo llamarlo), y desde donde se veía una gran parte del cuerpo principal de la casa —la habitación de Hyacinth pertenecía a una de las alas de atrás—, que tenía un hermoso color gris en las partes que no cubrían la hiedra u otras plantas trepadoras, y que resultaba desde dondequiera que se mirara un verdadero cuadro; con su empinado tejado rojizo, cortado por enormes chimeneas y caprichosos tragaluces, y con toda suerte de ventanas de distintas formas, además de muchos parches y salientes, y con una protuberancia arquitectónica especialmente fascinante, en la que estaba alojado un reloj, un reloj dorado y cubierto de adornos, pero con muchas huellas del paso del tiempo y de las inclemencias atmosféricas. No había estado nunca en el campo —en el verdadero campo, como él lo llamaba, el campo que no era sólo la franja que rodeaba Londres—, y por la abierta ventana entró el aliento de un mundo fabulosamente nuevo y, después de las horas febriles que había vivido, indeciblemente fresco, una sensación de aire suave y lleno de sol, mezclado con toda suerte de olores, todos ellos puros y agradables, y un silencio musical, formado sobre todo por el canto de los pájaros. Cerca, lejos, y en todas partes, había grandes árboles quietos, y todas las cosas que alegraban sus ojos no eran más que una parte de otros espacios más grandes y de un paisaje mucho más complicado. Un mundo entero se abría ante él: estaba esperándole bajo su ventana, cubierto de rocío, y tenía que bajar y tomar posesión de todo lo que pudiera.

Al llegar el día anterior, a las diez de la noche, sólo había tenido la impresión de atravesar un parque larguísimo después de haber cruzado una verja; del ruido de las ruedas del coche sobre la grava, de una serie de ventanas iluminadas, que sugerían un ambiente acogedor, y una fachada borrosa, que hacía un gran efecto a la luz de las estrellas. Fue un alivio para él que le dijeran que la princesa, debido a lo avanzado de la hora, le rogaba que la excusase hasta el día siguiente: el retraso le permitiría serenarse y ver un poco dónde estaba. Esta última oportunidad se le ofreció por primera vez al sentarse a cenar, en una sala grande y de techos altos, y con el criado que había conocido en South Street, colocado detrás de su silla. No se había preocupado de pensar cómo iban a tratarle: no tenía ni idea de si se hacían envidiosas distinciones en una casa de campo o si se marcaban las diferencias. En cualquier caso, estaba más que contento de la acogida, y cada vez más excitado ante ella. La cena fue escogida —aunque tenía los otros sentidos tan despiertos que se le quitó el hambre, y comió, como si dijéramos, sin haber comido—, y el autómata que tenía detrás le llenó el vaso de una bebida que le recordaba algunas estrofas de Keats en la *Oda a un ruiseñor*. Pensaba si podría escuchar a un ruiseñor en Medley (no estaba muy seguro de la época en que cantaba el pajarito), y también si el criado le hablaría, si sabría algo de él o sospecharía quién y qué era; cosa que, después de todo, no había razón para que supiera, a no ser por el escaso equipaje que llevaba el visitante de Lomax Place. Pero el señor Withers (ése era el nombre que le había oído al cochero), no dio más muestra de sociabilidad que preguntarle a qué hora quería que le llamasen por la mañana; a lo que contestó que prefería que no le llamaran a ninguna, que se levantaría él solo. El criado respondió: «Muy bien, señor», mientras Hyacinth pensaba que debía de tenerle asombrado y hasta consideraba para sus adentros si no sería mejor darle alguna pista, como precaución ante el posible descubrimiento de su identidad en circunstancias menos favorables. El objeto de semejante diplomacia era no verse agobiado por atenciones que no tenía costumbre de recibir; pero el propósito quedó en nada, por la sencilla razón de que antes de empezar a hablar se encontró con que le gustaba todo lo que había temido. Su intención de

rechazar los servicios desapareció, se había dado cuenta de que no existía ninguno que le importara perderse o para el que no estuviera preparado. Creía que probablemente le había dado las gracias demasiadas veces al señor Withers, pero eso era algo que no podía evitar, una tendencia irresistible y un error que sin duda alguna volvería a cometer.

Había dormido en una cama tan perfectamente calculada para asegurar el descanso que le debía en cierto modo el no acabar de encontrarse a gusto, y en un cuarto grande, de techos altos, y con unos espejos tan largos que, aun después de apagada la luz, seguían lanzando destellos espectrales. Colgados de las paredes había muchos dibujos y grabados antiguos, que él, quizá sin motivo, creía de gran mérito. Se levantó varias veces por la noche, encendió la palmatoria y se dedicó a mirarlos. Se miró también en uno de los espejos, y en aquel sitio en el que todo estaba hecho en tan gran escala vio más claro que nunca que el hijo de *mademoiselle* Vivier no tenía dimensión social alguna, y era una persona a la que apenas podía distinguirse. Al bajar la escalera se encontró con varias criadas que llevaban escobas y trapos del polvo o las vio a través de las puertas abiertas, arrodilladas delante de las chimeneas; y le parecía que le miraban con más descaro que si hubiera sido uno de los huéspedes habituales. Esas ideas dejaron de preocuparle en cuanto salió y empezó a vagar por el parque, por donde al principio fue caminando sin rumbo, y luego en círculos cada vez más estrechos y más próximos a la casa. Estuvo andando una hora, extasiado y casi sin aliento, tocando al pasar el rocío de los helechos y los setos del jardín, disfrutando la fragancia del aire y parándose en todas partes, transportado al encontrarse con alguna exquisita impresión. Todo su paseo estuvo poblado de encuentros: se había pasado la vida soñando con un sitio y unas cosas así, con una mañana y una oportunidad semejantes. Era a fines de abril y todo estaba fresco y lleno de vida; los grandes árboles eran una confusión de brotes en el aire matutino. Dio varias vueltas alrededor de la casa, fijándose en todo y apreciando cada detalle, disfrutando del conjunto y con miedo de que la princesa le mirara desde alguna ventana y no le pareciera bien lo que hacía. La casa no era suya, la había alquilado sólo por tres meses, y podía no halagarle a su principesco orgullo que le asombrara tanto. Había algo en la forma de alzarse sus muros grises sobre la verde hierba que le llevó lágrimas a los ojos; el espectáculo de algo que duraba mucho tiempo sin ir acompañado de la enfermedad o la pobreza era una cosa nueva para él; había vivido entre gentes para quienes la vejez significaba casi siempre una supervivencia a regañadientes. Medley aguantaba el paso del tiempo con una serenidad que era un éxito, una acumulación de dignidad y honor.

Un criado salió a buscarle al jardín para decirle que el desayuno estaba servido. No se le había ocurrido pensar en el desayuno, y al volver hacia la casa, escoltado por aquel misterioso sirviente, el ofrecimiento le parecía un regalo extravagante y gratuito, algo inesperado y romántico. Vio que tenía que desayunarse solo, y no hizo ninguna pregunta; pero, al terminar, apareció el criado para decirle que la princesa le vería después del almuerzo y que deseaba supiera que podía disponer de la biblioteca. Lo de «después del almuerzo» le parecía que retrasaba mucho el momento motivo de su venida, y le asombraba bastante que le invitara a estar con ella desde el sábado por la noche al domingo por la mañana, para pasar la mayor parte del tiempo sin verse. Pero no lo tomó a mal ni se impacientó: las impresiones que había acumulado eran ya una recompensa en sí mismas y, además, ¿qué mejor cosa podía hacer en una casa como aquella que esperar a una señora maravillosa? El señor Withers le condujo a la biblioteca, y le dejó allí en medio, asombrado ante los tesoros que había. Era una habitación muy grande y antigua de color castaño —el techo mismo era de ese color, aunque tenía algunas figuras ligeramente doradas—, en la que hileras e hileras de lomos con hermosas letras parecían llamarle a uno. Un fuego de leña chisporroteaba en la gran chimenea, y había unos entrantes profundos con asientos junto a las ventanas, y unos sillones como no había visto en su vida, lujosos, tapizados de cuero, y con un atril para sostener el libro; y una enorme mesa al lado de una de las ventanas, con un surtido completo de papel, plumas, tinteros, secantes, sellos, estampillas, palmatorias, pisapapeles, rollos de cordel y cortaplumas. No había imaginado nunca que la correspondencia pidiera tantos accesorios y, antes de apartarse de la mesa, escribió una tarjeta a Millicent con más esmero que nunca —su letra era muy cuidada, pero al mismo tiempo suelta y bonita—, y más que nada por el gusto de ver el membrete «Medley Hall» grabado en rojo y que parecía heráldico. En una hora había pasado revista a toda la colección, había sacado casi todos los libros, con ganas de tenerlos una semana, y había vuelto a meterlos en cuanto sus ojos se fijaban en el siguiente, todavía más tentador. Había encontrado algunas encuadernaciones raras y sacado algunos indicios que se consideraba muy capaz de aprovechar. De momento, pensaba que la felicidad sería encerrarse dos o tres meses entre los tesoros de Medley. Se olvidó del mundo exterior, y la mañana —el hermoso domingo de primavera— se desvaneció para él mientras andaba por allí.

Estaba en lo alto de una escalera cuando oyó una voz que decía:

—Temo que haya mucho polvo; en esta casa, ¿sabe?, es el polvo de los siglos.

Miró hacia abajo y vio a *madame* Grandoni en medio de la habitación. Se dispuso a bajar en seguida a saludarla, pero ella exclamó:

—¡No se mueva, no se mueva si no tiene vértigo! Podemos hablar desde aquí. Sólo he venido para demostrarle que *estamos* en la casa y para decirle que tenga paciencia. Es probable que la princesa le vea dentro de unas horas.

—Eso espero —contestó desde su percha, más bien desalentado ante el «probable».

—*Natürlich*, pero ha habido gente que ha venido y se ha marchado sin verla. Todo depende del humor que tenga.

—¿Quiere usted decir aunque haya mandado llamarlos?

—¿Quién puede saber si ha mandado llamarlos o no?

—Pero ya sabe usted que a mí sí que me mandó llamar —dijo Hyacinth mirando hacia abajo y asombrado del extraño efecto que producía la peluca de *madame* Grandoni a vista de pájaro.

—¡Sí, claro que mandó por usted, pobre muchacho! —La señora le miró sonriente, y se comunicaron un poco en silencio—. El capitán Sholto ha venido más de una vez de la misma manera y no ha salido mejor librado.

—¿El capitán Sholto? —repitió Hyacinth.

—La pura verdad, pero si hablamos a esta distancia tengo que cerrar la puerta.

Volvió a desandar el camino, mientras él la contemplaba, cerró la puerta, y avanzó hacia el centro de la biblioteca, con aire cansado, arrastrando los pies, como si los zapatos le estuvieran demasiado grandes. Hyacinth bajó de la escalera.

—Eso es lo que pasa. Es una *capricciosa*.

—No acabo de entender la forma en que habla de ella —dijo Hyacinth muy serio—. Parece su amiga, pero dice cosas que no le son favorables.

—Querido joven, le digo a ella cosas peores de las que digo a usted. Soy un poco bruta, sí, incluso con usted, con quien no hay duda que tendría que ser especialmente amable. Pero no soy falsa. Eso no lo tenemos los alemanes. Algún día me oirá. *Soy* amiga de la princesa, y no sería nada malo que no tuviera nunca otra peor. Pero también me gustaría ser amiga suya, ¿qué quiere que le haga? Quizá no sirva de nada. En todo caso, aquí está usted.

—Sí, aquí estoy —intentó sonreír Hyacinth.

—¿Y cuánto tiempo se quedará? Perdóneme si se lo pregunto; forma parte de mi brusquedad.

—Hasta mañana por la mañana. Debo estar en el trabajo a mediodía.

—Eso está muy bien. ¿No recuerda que la otra vez le dije que se mantuviera fiel?

—Sí, fue un consejo muy bueno. Pero yo creo que exagera los peligros que corro.

—Tanto mejor —dijo *madame* Grandoni—; aunque ahora que le miro bien, empiezo a ponerlo en duda. Veo que es uno de esos tipos que gustan a las mujeres. Puedo asegurarlo… Me gusta a mí también. A mi edad —ciento veinte años— creo que puedo decirlo, ¿no? Pero si la princesa dijera lo mismo sería otra cosa; recuerde que cualquier lisonja que salga de sus labios resultaría mucho menos discreta. Pero quizá no tenga ocasión de hacerlo; a lo mejor no vuelve a venir. Hay quien ha venido una sola vez. *Vedremo bene*. Debo decirle que no estoy en modo alguno en contra de que un joven se tome unas vacaciones, una pequeña expansión de cuando en cuando. —*Madame* Grandoni continuó en un tono discursivo, confidencial y algo desconectado—: En Roma se la toman cada cinco días; no cabe duda que es demasiado. En Alemania con menos frecuencia. En este país, pues no sé qué decirle, siempre que suponga un esfuerzo: ¡el domingo inglés es tan difícil! En todo caso, para usted ésta tiene que haber resultado muy bonita. Que lo pase bien y que se encuentre a gusto pero ¡vuelva a casa mañana!

Y con estas palabras *madame* Grandoni se encaminó hacia la puerta, mientras él iba también para abrírsela.

—Puedo decirlo porque no es mi casa. Estoy aquí igual que usted. Y algunas veces también pienso en marcharme al día siguiente.

—Me imagino que no tendrá que ganarse la vida todos los días como yo. Para mí es bastante motivo —dijo Hyacinth.

Estaba parada en el umbral, y tenía clavados en él sus ojillos feos, amables y expresivos:

—Creo ser casi tan pobre como usted. Y en cambio, no tengo aspecto de noble. Pero lo soy —dijo la señora sacudiendo la peluca.

—¡Y yo no lo soy! —contestó Hyacinth con una gran sonrisa.

—Es preferible que no le suban a uno tanto como a nuestra amiga. Eso no da la felicidad.

—A uno mismo quizá no, ¡pero a los otros!

Desde el sitio donde estaban contempló el gran *hall* decorado con paneles de madera, que recibía luz de arriba y tenía un fresco borroso en el techo. Toda aquella grandeza le impresionó.

—¿Admira mucho todo lo que hay aquí, disfruta mucho viéndolo? —preguntó *madame* Grandoni.

—¡Mucho!, ¡mucho!

Se quedó mirándole un momento y dijo antes de marcharse:

—*Poverino!*

Dos horas más tarde la princesa envió por él y fue conducido al piso de arriba a través de corredores con alfombras rojas y cuadros en las paredes e introducido en un salón grande y claro, que luego supo que ella usaba como gabinete. Había oído la música antes de llegar a la puerta, y estaba preparado para verla sentada al piano, ya que no para ver que seguía tocando después de llegar él. Volvió la cabeza hacia la puerta y le sonrió sin levantar las manos del teclado, mientras el criado, como si acabara de llegar, anunciaba en voz alta su nombre. La habitación estaba en una esquina de la casa, recibía la luz por los dos lados y era grande y soleada; estaba tapizada con una seda alegre y clara, y amueblada con toda suerte de sofás, asientos más pequeños y mesitas, muchas de ellas con grandes jarrones de flores recién cortadas. Por todas partes se veían libros, periódicos, revistas y fotografías de celebridades que habían estampado su firma, y daba la impresión de ser un sitio donde se vivía con lujo y sin trabajar demasiado. Hyacinth estaba allí de pie, sin decidirse a avanzar, y la princesa, que seguía tocando y sonriendo, le hizo señas para que se sentara junto al piano:

—Siéntese ahí y escuche.

Hizo lo que le indicaba, y ella continuó tocando un buen rato sin mirarle. Eso le daba mayor libertad para contemplarla, al tiempo que con los ojos recorría la habitación, un poco ausente, pero con una expresión de felicidad, como perdido en la música, apaciguado y mecido por ella. Una ventana que había junto a ella estaba medio abierta, y la claridad del día y todo el olor de la primavera se difundían y daban alegría y pureza al ambiente. Encontraba a la princesa extraordinariamente joven y guapa, tenía un aire tan esbelto y sencillo, y al mismo tiempo tan amistoso, a pesar de no haber dejado de tocar y no haberle ofrecido la mano, que acabó por recostarse en el asiento con la sensación de que todo su malestar y su tensión nerviosa estaban desapareciendo y que podía confiar en su amabilidad, en aquella manera tan original y espontánea en que parecía tratarle siempre. Esa peculiar manera, mitad consideración, mitad camaradería, le parecía dictada por tan sabia y amable intención. Siguió tocando con el mismo sentimiento, una pieza tras otra; no había escuchado nunca una música ni un talento semejantes. Dos o tres veces volvió los ojos hacia él, y en esos momentos brillaba en ellos aquella expresión que era la esencia de su belleza; una luz entremezclada que parecía pertenecer a un eterno verano, pero que sugería otras estaciones ya pasadas, una experiencia que era sólo una exquisita memoria. Le preguntó si le gustaba la música, y luego añadió riendo que debía haberse asegurado antes, mientras él contestaba —ya se lo había dicho en South Street, pero parecía haberlo olvidado— que era aficionadísimo a ella.

Hyacinth poseía en alto grado el sentido de lo que era la belleza en las mujeres; era una facultad que le llevaba a apreciar, hasta el punto de adorarlas, todas las virtudes de ese poder y las profundidades de semejante misterio; la delicadeza de los rasgos, cada detalle y cada matiz que pudiera contribuir al encanto. Por eso, aunque no hubiera sabido apreciar la armonía que el genio de la princesa arrancaba a su instrumento, su situación no habría carecido de interés al tener ocasión de contemplar su admirable silueta y movimientos, la forma noble de la cabeza, las glorias acumuladas en el pelo, y la frescura como de flor que no necesitaba tener miedo de la luz. Estaba vestida en tonos claros y con tanta sencillez como una niña. Antes de dejar de tocar, le preguntó qué le gustaría hacer por la tarde: ¿podía poner alguna objeción a dar un paseo en coche con ella? Era muy probable que le gustara ver el campo. No pareció esperar su respuesta, ahogada por el sonido del piano, pero si la hubiera oído no le habrían quedado dudas sobre lo que deseaba. Siguió contemplando la cornisa de la habitación durante un rato, mientras sus manos se movían de un lado a otro; luego, de repente, dejó de tocar, se levantó y se acercó a él:

—Probablemente no le daré más la lata. Ya conoce lo peor. ¿Quiere hacer el favor de cerrar el piano?

Hyacinth hizo lo que se le pedía, y ella fue hacia el otro lado de la habitación y se sentó en una butaca. Al acercarse él, dijo:

—¿Es verdad que no ha visto nunca un parque ni un jardín ni ninguna de las bellezas de la naturaleza y todas esas cosas?

La alusión se refería a algo que él había comentado en su carta, cuando contestó a la nota en que ella le proponía ir a Medley y, después de asegurarle que era verdad, la princesa exclamó:

—¡Cuánto me alegro, cuánto me alegro! Jamás he podido enseñar a nadie una cosa nueva, y siempre he

pensado que me encantaría hacerlo, sobre todo a una persona sensible. Entonces, ¿irá a dar un paseo conmigo?

Hablaba como si se tratara de un gran favor.

Aquel fue el principio de la relación —tan extraña si se consideran sus respectivas situaciones— que había venido a disfrutar a Medley y que había de pasar por fases bastante singulares. La princesa tenía una propensión extraordinaria a dar las cosas por sentadas, a ignorar las dificultades y a suponer que sus preferencias habían de traducirse en hechos. Después de estar diez minutos más con su invitado —tiempo que se pasó principalmente entre exclamaciones de alegría al ver que había visto tan poco de lo que era la esencia de Medley (dónde querría que lo hubiera visto, se preguntaba él)—; después de haber descansado un poco de sus esfuerzos al piano, propuso que salieran al jardín. Ella andaba muchísimo —dijo—, le convenía andar. Tenía que dejarle solo un momento; le dio el último numero de la *Revue des Deux Mondes* para que se entretuviera, y le dijo que se fijara sobre todo en un cuento de Octave Feuillet porque tenía curiosidad por saber lo que opinaba. Reapareció poco después con un sombrero oscuro y una sombrilla, llevando unos guantes frescos y sueltos, y dándole al chico la impresión de que era la heroína de la narración de Feuillet que había estado leyendo. Al bajar la escalera se acordó de que todavía no le había enseñado la casa y que podría divertirle hacerlo; dio media vuelta y le llevó por todas partes, arriba y abajo, hasta a la gran cocina anticuada, donde encontraron a un hombre bajito y colorado, que llevaba chaqueta, delantal y gorro blanco (adorno que se quitó para saludar al encuadernador), a quien la princesa hablaba en italiano, lengua que Hyacinth entendía lo suficiente para darse cuenta de que hablaba al cocinero en segunda persona del singular, como si fuera un servidor de la época feudal. Recordó que era así como los tres mosqueteros trataban a sus criados.

La princesa explicó que el caballero del gorro blanco era una criatura encantadora (no podía soportar a los criados ingleses, aunque se veía obligada a tener dos o tres) y que le hacía gran cantidad de *risottos* y *polentas*, porque ella tenía el paladar de una campesina italiana. Le enseñó todas las cosas: el extraño rincón que había sido en otros tiempos capilla; la escalera secreta utilizada durante la persecución de los católicos (los dueños de Medley, al igual que la princesa, profesaban el antiguo credo); la galería de los músicos, situada sobre el *hall*; la sala de los tapices, que la gente acudía a ver desde muy lejos, y el cuarto encantado (había quien los confundía, pero eran distintos) en que algunas veces aparecía una horrible figura, un fantasma enano con una cabeza enorme, que era el espectro de un hermano mayor desposeído de la herencia hacía muchos años, y al que habían quitado de en medio no sabía cómo, después de hacerle pasar por idiota. La princesa ofreció a su visitante el privilegio de dormir en esa habitación, aunque confesó que ella no entraría allí sola por nada del mundo; era una persona de pocas luces, consumida por miserables supersticiones:

—No sé si soy una persona religiosa o si en el caso de que lo fuera mi religión sería supersticiosa, pero en lo que realmente creo es en mis supersticiones.

Le hizo pasar por el salón muy de prisa, dijo que volverían a verlo y que era más bien soso —los salones de las casas inglesas de campo siempre eran una estupidez—, pero si le divertía podía estar allí después de cenar. *Madame* Grandoni y ella solían quedarse en el piso de arriba, pero estaban dispuestas a hacer lo que fuera con tal que se encontrase a gusto.

Al fin salieron de la casa y mientras iban andando, para justificarse y no ser acusada de extravagante, le explicó que aunque pareciera un disparate haber cogido una casa tan grande para dos apacibles mujeres, no era en modo alguno lo que ella habría preferido y que además era mucho más barata de lo que probablemente se imaginaba; no la habría cogido nunca de no ser barata. Debía parecerle absurdo que una mujer se asociara a la sublevación de los pobres y, en cambio, viviera en un palacio, una casa con cuarenta o cincuenta habitaciones. Ésa fue una de las dos únicas alusiones que hizo a su interés por la «causa», pero resultó muy oportuna, porque Hyacinth ya había pensado que la cosa era bastante anormal. No se le había quitado de la cabeza en todo el día; contribuía grandemente a fortalecer su sentido de lo tragicómico pensar que la princesa se había retirado a un paraíso privado para resolver el problema de los suburbios. Por eso la escuchaba con gran atención mientras ella aclaraba que sólo había contratado la casa por tres meses, pues quería descansar después de haber pasado un invierno de tantas visitas y vida en público (como se la pasaban los ingleses tras de tanto hablar de su veneración por el *home*) y que no le apetecía volver a Londres tan pronto; aunque tenía que confesar que conservaba la casa de South Street, porque se le había ocurrido de repente que era mejor conservarla que tener que sacar sus cosas. Uno tenía que guardarlas en algún sitio y, después de todo, ¿por qué no iba a ser aquél un *dépôt* como otro cualquiera? Medley no era lo que ella habría escogido de haber podido decidir por sí misma, pero no había podido hacerlo, no podía hacerlo nunca; eran los propietarios los que la habían embarcado, se los había encontrado en algún sitio y

habían estado dándole coba, convenciéndola de que podía alquilarla casi por nada, por no más de lo que iba a pagar por el *cottage*, con enredadera de madreselva, o por la casita del vicario con su cenador y su clemátide, que eran realmente lo que ella había estado buscando. Además, era una de esas mansiones viejas y mohosas, que están siempre muy lejos de la ciudad y es muy difícil alquilarlas; y encima era una verdadera desgracia de casa, sin ninguna comodidad. Hyacinth, para quien las tres horas de tren habían sido una sucesión de felices sobresaltos y que no se había dado cuenta de que su situación geográfica fuera tan remota, preguntó a la princesa qué quería decir con la palabra «desgracia». Ella contestó que se caía a pedazos, que era algo imposible en todos los aspectos y estaba llena de fantasmas y de malos olores.

—Ésa fue la única razón de que la alquilara. No quiero que crea que vivo entre toda clase de lujos o que tiro el dinero. ¡No, no!

A Hyacinth le era imposible calcular la importancia que su opinión pudiera tener para ella, y veía que aunque le juzgaba un ser todavía virgen, cuya *naïvete* le divertía, tenía también el capricho de tratarle como a un viejo amigo, una persona con quien tuviera costumbre de comentar sus dificultades. Su actuación en el papel que había decidido representar era perfecta, y todo quedaba clarísimo para él, salvo el motivo que la llevaba a representarlo.

Uno de los jardines de Medley le entusiasmó más que los otros; estaba cerrado por altos muros de ladrillo, y en las partes más soleadas se cultivaban albaricoques y ciruelas; tenía unos caminos estrechos bordeados con flores caseras y pasadas de moda, que encerraban inmensos cuadros con árboles frutales y en donde olía a menta y lavándula. Por la parte sur daba sobre un pequeño canal ya en desuso, y se había levantado allí un dique de tierra alto que era también muy largo y ancho y estaba cubierto de hierba; de forma que la parte de arriba que daba sobre el canal formaba una magnífica terraza y era un sitio estupendo para pasear por él con un acompañante en un día de verano, y más aún por tener en ambos extremos un curioso pabellón, una especie de casita de té japonesa, que acababa de darle un aire de otros tiempos y era un lugar privado y de descanso, un refugio contra el sol o el posible chaparrón. Uno de esos pabellones estaba dedicado a almacén de herramientas y macetas sobrantes, el otro estaba empapelado por dentro con un extraño papel chino que representaba siempre el mismo grupo de personas con cara de gatitos ciegos que tomaban el té sentadas en el suelo. Había también una vitrina desvencijada con incrustaciones, en la que se veían a través de cristales verdosos varias tazas y platos, además de un coco labrado y un par de ídolos exóticos. Sobre un sofá, no muy cómodo a pesar de sus cojines deslucidos que parecían un muestrario, había un estante con una hilera de novelas, novelas pasadas de moda y que ya no se publicaban, libros que no podían encontrarse más que allí. Encima de la chimenea había un recipiente con hojas de rosa secas mezcladas con alguna hierba aromática, y todo el lugar daba la impresión de humedad.

Hyacinth estuvo paseando por la terraza con la princesa hasta que ella se dio cuenta de que no había tomado nada. Él aseguró que eso era lo que menos le preocupaba, pero ella dijo que no le había llevado hasta Medley para matarle de hambre, y que tenía que volver y alimentarse. Volvieron, pero dando un gran rodeo por el parque, de forma que pudieron hablar media hora más. Ella le dijo que se desayunaba a las doce, como en el extranjero, y tomaba té por la tarde; como él tenía mucho de extranjero, quizá lo prefiriera también, y en ese caso podían desayunarse juntos por la mañana. Podían llevarle café o lo que quisiera a su habitación cuando se despertara. Cuando Hyacinth se recobró del susto que le produjo la noticia —se imaginaba a un criado disponiendo un servicio de plata junto a su cama—, dijo que realmente, en lo tocante a la mañana, lo que tenía que hacer era volver a Londres. Había un tren a las nueve, y esperaba que no le importaría que lo cogiese. Le miró seria y cariñosa, como si tuviera que pensarlo mucho, y dijo después:

—¡Ah, sí! Me importa muchísimo. Mañana no, cualquier otro día.

Él no contestó, y la princesa se puso a hablar de otra cosa; pero su respuesta había sido privada y consistía en pensar que tenía que marcharse de Medley por la mañana, dijera lo que dijera. No podía quedarse, perdería el trabajo. Y además *madame* Grandoni lo creía muy importante; lo que la señora quería decir no estaba muy claro, pero no dejaba de impresionarle. Por otra parte, tenía que contar con la protesta de la princesa; comprendía que podía tomar otra forma que no fueran sólo las palabras que acababa de pronunciar y que sería para él un compromiso. Era menos solemne y menos explícita que *madame* Grandoni, pero había algo en su forma agradable de oponerse y en el tono en que mostraba su preferencia que parecía decirle que estaba a punto de perder su libertad, la libertad que había conseguido conservar (hasta el día en que la hipotecó con Hoffendahl) y que hasta cierto punto le había consolado de carecer de otras cosas. Eso le inquietaba; ¿qué iba a ser de él si tenía que añadir una servidumbre más a la que ya había echado sobre sus hombros al final de aquel largo y angustioso viaje bajo la lluvia, en el dormitorio de

una casa que aún no sabía muy bien dónde paraba, y mientras Muniment, Poupin y Schinkel, muy pálidos los tres, escuchaban y aceptaban el juramento? Muniment, Poupin y Schinkel, ¡qué lejos se sentía de ellos en aquel momento, y qué poco tenía que ver con el chico que había hecho la peregrinación en el coche, y lo asombrados que iban a quedarse, al menos los dos últimos, si pudieran verle por un agujero y preguntarse en qué andaba metido!

Hyacinth también se lo preguntaba mientras la princesa hablaba de la gente y los sitios que había visto, las impresiones y conclusiones a que había llegado después de su primer encuentro. Su conversación no tocaba otros temas; parecía no querer aludir a las cosas que le concernían, y estaba sorprendido al ver que evitaba hablar de los suburbios y de los sacrificios que pensaba hacer. No nombraba a ninguno de sus amigos por su nombre, pero hablaba de su carácter, su casa, sus costumbres, dando siempre por sentado que Hyacinth podía seguirla. Por lo que podía comprender, se sentía edificado, pero tenía que confesarse que la mitad de las veces no sabía de qué hablaba. En cualquier caso, de haber sido él quien estaba con los duques —no llamaba duques a sus amigos, pero estaba seguro que pertenecían a esa especie—, habría logrado más satisfacciones. En conjunto, parecía juzgar a los ingleses con mucha severidad; considerar que tenían poco talento y todavía menos moralidad. «La gente no debería ser viciosa encima de ser pesada», decía; y Hyacinth le daba vueltas, pensando que no debía de haber comprendido aún el punto de vista de una persona para quien la aristocracia era una colección de pelmazos. Se había alegrado muchas veces de oírlos llamar sinvergüenzas, pero se sentía más bien desilusionado por la versión que de ellos daba la princesa. Comentó también que ella no tenía ninguna moralidad convencional —debía haberlo dicho antes —, pero que nunca la habían acusado de ser tonta. A lo mejor no se daba cuenta, pero muchos de los que tenían que ver con ella pensaban que era demasiado lista. La segunda alusión que hizo a sus ulteriores designios (los de Hyacinth y los suyos) fue cuando dijo:

—Decidí verla —seguía hablando de la sociedad inglesa— para comprobar por mí misma lo que es antes de que la hagamos volar por los aires. Y sigue siendo el antiguo régimen, toda la podredumbre y la extravagancia, plagados de toda suerte de iniquidades y abusos, sobre los que pasó la Revolución francesa como un torbellino; o quizá sea más bien la reproducción del mundo romano de la decadencia, gotoso, apoplético, depravado, atiborrado de riqueza y despojos, egoísmo y escepticismo, y esperando la llegada de los bárbaros. Usted y yo somos los bárbaros, ¿comprende?

La animadversión de la princesa resultaba más bien vaga y no le había obsequiado con ninguna anécdota —quizá tampoco la hubiera entendido— que traicionase la hospitalidad de que había disfrutado. No podía tratarle como si fuera un embajador. A modo de defensa de la aristocracia, él le dijo que no podía creer que todos fueran una caterva de sinvergüenzas (empleó esa expresión porque había dado a entender que le gustaba que hablara en el lenguaje del pueblo), sobre todo teniendo en cuenta que él conocía a uno de ellos —una señora de la nobleza— que era uno de los seres más puros, buenos y honrados que pudiera imaginarse. Al oírlo dejó de hablar, le miró y preguntó luego:

—¿A quién se refiere… una señora de la nobleza?

—No creo que haya ningún mal en decirlo. *Lady* Aurora Langrish.

—No la conozco. ¿Es agradable?

—A mí me gusta mucho.

—¿Es guapa, inteligente?

—No es guapa, pero no es nada corriente —dijo Hyacinth.

—¿Y cómo la ha conocido? —En vista de que vacilaba, añadió—: ¿Le encuadernó algún libro?

—No, la conocí en un sitio que se llama Audley Court.

—¿Dónde está eso?

—En Camberwell.

—¿Y quién vive allí?

—Una chica joven a la que había ido a visitar y que está imposibilitada.

—Y la señora de quien habla (¿cómo se llama; *lady* Lydia Languish?), ¿va a verla?

—Sí, muy a menudo.

La princesa, sin apartar los ojos de él, hizo una pausa:

—¿Quiere llevarme a mí allí?

—Con mucho gusto. La chica de que hablo es hermana del hombre —el que trabaja para una gran firma de productos farmacéuticos— del que a lo mejor recuerda que le hablé otra vez.

—Sí, sí que me acuerdo. Ése es uno de los primeros sitios a los que tenemos que ir. Lo siento, ¿sabe?

La princesa echó a andar, y Hyacinth preguntó qué era lo que sentía, pero ella no hizo caso de la pregunta y dijo en seguida:

—A lo mejor va a verle a él.

—¿Va a ver a quién?

—Al joven farmacéutico, al hermano —dijo ella muy seria.

—Es posible —contestó Hyacinth riendo.

La princesa dijo otra vez que lo sentía, y él intentó saber por qué, ¿porque *lady* Aurora fuera así? A lo que ella contestó:

—No, no es por eso, es por no ser yo la primera… (¿cómo los llama?), la primera señora de la nobleza que conoce.

—No veo qué diferencia pueda haber. No necesita tener miedo de no impresionarme.

—No estaba pensando en eso. Estaba pensando que a lo mejor no es tan inexperto como creí en un principio.

—Desde luego, no sé lo que pensó en un principio.

—No, claro, ¿cómo iba a saberlo? —suspiró la princesa de una manera bastante rara.

XXIII

Estaba en la biblioteca, después de almorzar, cuando fueron a avisarle de que el coche esperaba en la puerta para el paseo; y al llegar al *hall* se encontró con *madame* Grandoni, con gorro y capa, esperando a que bajara su amiga.

—Como ve, voy con ustedes. Yo siempre estoy en medio —comentó sonriendo—. La princesa me lleva con ella para que la cuide, y es así como lo hago. Además, no me pierdo nunca el paseo.

—Pues no se parece a mí; éste es el primero que voy a dar en mi vida.

Podía hacer ese comentario sin amargura, porque estaba demasiado contento con el proyecto para pensar que la presencia de la señora iba a estropearlo. No tenía nada que decirle a la princesa que ella no pudiera oír. No le molestó que fuera ni aun después de que ella, en respuesta a su comentario y quizá en un tono más serio de lo que se proponía, contestó:

—No me extraña que no se haya pasado la vida en coche. Los coches no tienen nada que ver con su oficio.

—Afortunadamente, no. Resultaría un cochero ridículo.

Apareció la princesa y los tres subieron a un milord grande y cuadrado, un vehículo alto y pasado de moda, con la caja verde, una tapicería deslucida y un pescante para el criado (la princesa dijo que se había alquilado con la casa), que rodaba despacio y solemne por la tortuosa avenida y que atravesó la puerta dorada del parque, que estaba rematada por un enorme escudo. La marcha de aquel trío, en apariencia mal avenido, resultaba realmente grandiosa y era uno de los motivos por los que Hyacinth la juzgaba memorable. Podían estarle reservadas aún mayores alegrías —estaba ya embarcado y no reconocía límites —, pero en su vida volvería a ser tan importante. El viaje fue largo y cumplido, pero poco lo que se habló durante él. «Voy a enseñarle el país entero; es exquisitamente hermoso, parece que hable al corazón». Poco más era lo que le había dicho al empezar el paseo, y luego, como persona extranjera y con un leve movimiento de cabeza para señalar el paisaje humanizado, comentó: «*Voilà ce que j'aime en Angleterre*». El resto del tiempo se limitó a estar sentada frente a él, con su tranquila dulzura y bajo la sombrilla de encaje que se balanceaba suavemente; volvía los ojos hacia donde veía que miraba, y permitía que se posaran en los suyos cuando pasaban por algún sitio especialmente bonito; sonreía como si se divirtiera casi tanto como él y, de cuando en cuando, con tres palabras que sonaban como una caricia, llamaba su atención sobre algún paisaje o algún detalle pintoresco. *Madame* Grandoni fue casi todo el tiempo medio dormida, con la barbilla apoyada en el boa de armiño raído en que se había envuelto, aunque en algunos momentos volvía a la realidad y al ver el paisaje soltaba unas confusas exclamaciones en el primer idioma que se le venía a la cabeza. Si Hyacinth se sentía transportado durante aquellas horas maravillosas, tenía al menos conciencia de su vertiginosa ascensión, y se mantenía solemnemente tranquilo, como con miedo de que algún falso movimiento pudiera romper el encanto y hacer que cayera el telón. Eso se producía sobre todo cuando su sensibilidad saltaba de las cosas que aparecían en el camino, y que eran todas una imagen de algo por lo que había suspirado, a la mujer más guapa de Inglaterra, que estaba allí sentada, justo enfrente de él, y a disposición suya, como si fuera un pintor encargado de hacerle un retrato. Más de una vez lo vio todo a través de una extraña niebla; tenía los ojos llenos de lágrimas.

Aquella noche, después de cenar, estuvieron en el salón, como la princesa le había prometido o más bien amenazado, en opinión de Hyacinth. La amenaza venía de su temor de que las señoras se pusieran elegantes y que él se encontrara más mísero que nunca en contraste con el escenario y los acompañantes, ya que lo más parecido a una chaqueta que tenía lo llevaba ya puesto, y le resultaba imposible cambiarlo por un traje de los que la gente civilizada (eso sí lo sabía aunque no pudiera emularlos) se ponía a eso de las ocho de la tarde. Cuando las señoras bajaron a cenar iban realmente de fiesta; pero él tuvo el consuelo de pensar que prefería estar vestido como estaba, aunque fuera de manera pobre e inadecuada, antes que ofrecer la facha

de *madame* Grandoni, que resultaba más bien cómica vestida de tiros largos. Cada vez estaba más convencido de que si a la princesa no le importaba que fuera pobre, él tampoco debía preocuparse. El lugar que ocupaba no se lo había buscado, le habían colocado allí por fuerza; no significaba que quisiera abrirse paso. ¡Qué poco le importaba a la princesa! —en realidad cuánto se divertía teniéndole allí y jugándole una mala pasada a la sociedad, la sociedad convencional que había sondeado y que despreciaba— se había puesto de manifiesto al presentarle al grupo que encontraron esperándolos en el *hall* volver del paseo: cuatro señoras, la madre y tres hijas, que habían venido a verlos desde Broome, un sitio que distaba unas cinco millas. Por lo que pudo entender, Broome era también una gran casa, y *lady* Marchant, la madre, era esposa de un magnate del condado. Dijo que habían entrado ante los ruegos del mayordomo, que les había dicho que la vuelta de la princesa era inminente y les había servido el té sin que esperaran ese acontecimiento. La tarde se había puesto fría, el fuego estaba encendido en el *hall*, y todos sentados cerca de él, alrededor de la mesa de té, y bajo el gran techo que se alzaba hasta el tejado de la casa. Hyacinth conversó principalmente con una de las hijas, una chica muy mona, con la espalda erguida y los brazos largos, y que llevaba al cuello un boa de piel tan ajustado que, para mirar un poquito de lado, tenía que dar la vuelta a todo el cuerpo. Tenía una cara bonita pero inexpresiva, sobre la que se reflejaban las llamas sin conseguir animarla, una voz agradable y el dominio fortuito de unas cuantas palabras. Le preguntó a Hyacinth que con qué pandilla cazaba, y si se dedicaba al tenis, y se comió tres *moffins*.

Nuestro joven comprendió que *lady* Marchant y sus hijas ya habían estado en Medley, y hasta adivinó que el recibimiento de la princesa, que debía de pensar que eran de las pesadas, no había sido entusiástico; y su imaginación iba todavía más lejos, para desentrañar los motivos que las habían llevado a repetir la visita, a pesar de la tibia acogida, y como no fuera por lo raro que resultaba encontrar una princesa en aquel país. La charla junto al fuego, mientras el chico se las arreglaba como podía (el estado de ánimo de su anfitriona se le estaba contagiando) con la belleza que comía *muffins*, la conversación, acompañada del delicado tintineo de las tazas de té, resultaba de tan buena educación como podía permitirlo el evidente y extraño partipris de la princesa, dedicada a poner a prueba a la pobre *lady* Marchant. Con muchísima urbanidad pedía explicación de todo, especialmente de las comedidas observaciones de su señoría y del sentido en que las había hecho, de forma que Hyacinth apenas podía entenderla y se preguntaba qué interés tendría en dar la impresión de ser tan pesada. Más tarde supo que la familia Marchant tenía la virtud de atacarle los nervios y en algunos momentos de sacarla de quicio. Se preguntaba también qué le ocurriría al miembro de la familia con quien estaba si alguien le dijera que estaba hablando (por poco que fuera) con un golfillo de Londres; y aunque estaba más bien contento de que no hubiera descubierto su condición (no atribuía sus pocas palabras a esa idea), pensaba también en algunos momentos si no sería más digno no ocultarla, no escudarse como un cobarde tras el disfraz. ¿Por quién le tomaba —o más bien por quién no lo estaba tomando— cuando le preguntó si cazaba y si se «dedicaba»? Quizá fuera porque estaba algo oscuro; si hubiese habido más luz en aquel *hall* tan grande habría visto que no era uno de los suyos. Le parecía que por aquellas fechas ya había estado bastantes veces con gente encopetada, pero siempre habían sabido lo que era y habían podido escoger la forma de tratarle. Aquélla era la primera vez que una señorita no había sido advertida, y tenía la sensación de que le pasaban revista. Decidió no descubrirse, por la sencilla razón de que sería descubrir a la princesa. *Ella* tenía en su mano decirle al oído a la señorita Marchant: «¿Sabes que es un pobre encuadernador que gana sólo unos chelines a la semana en una calle horrible del Soho? Hay toda suerte de cosas —y creo que una espantosa— en relación con su origen. Me parece que debería advertírselo». Casi le apetecía advertírselo a él, sólo por ver la sensación que iba a causar la noticia; sentía una extraña comezón por saber qué hacía la señorita Marchant en semejante trance y qué coro de exclamaciones —o qué silencio de muerte— se elevaría hasta las pinturas del techo. Pero, después de todo, él no era el responsable; había entrado en un nebuloso pasaje de su destino en el que la responsabilidad desaparecía. A *madame* Grandoni el té la había despabilado; acudía siempre a salvar la conversación cuando estaba en peligro y les hablaba a las visitas de Roma, donde habían pasado un invierno, describiendo con mucha gracia la forma en que las familias inglesas, que había estado viendo durante casi medio siglo, inspeccionaban las ruinas y monumentos y metían la nariz en las ceremonias de la Iglesia. Estaba claro que las cuatro señoras no sabían qué hacer con la princesa; pero, aunque quizá pensaran que era una compañera pagada, estaban bien convencidas de que aquella extravagante señora gorda había conocido a los Millington, los Bunbury y los Tripp.

Después de la cena (en la que la princesa se permitió muchas bromas sobre la visita y dijo que Hyacinth no podía dejar de ir con ella a devolvérsela y a ver su casa y su manera de vivir), *madame* Grandoni se sentó al piano a petición de Christina y estuvo tocando durante una hora. Los espacios en aquel enorme salón eran grandes, y se habían colocado a bastante distancia unos de otros. Las notas de la señora se derramaban

discretamente entre la suave luz multiplicada de los candelabros; conocía docenas de aires populares italianos, que sonaban como las tonadillas olvidadas de un pueblo, y tocó luego una serie de *Lieder* alemanes, tiernos y quejumbrosos, despertando sin violencia los ecos del pomposo salón. Era la música de una mujer vieja y parecía temblar un poco como lo hubiera hecho su voz. La princesa, sumergida en un sillón, escuchaba cubierta por su abanico. Hyacinth al menos suponía que escuchaba, porque no se había movido. Por fin, *madame* Grandoni se levantó y se acercó al joven. Había cogido al pasar un libro francés encuadernado en rojo y lo tenía debajo del brazo mientras le miraba.

—Pobre amiguito mío, tengo que decirle buenas noches. Ya no volveré a verle por ahora, pues para tomar el primer tren tendrá que salir de casa antes de que me ponga la peluca, y yo jamás aparezco delante de los caballeros sin ella. Creo que he cuidado a la princesa bastante bien, y durante todo el día, para ponerla a salvo de cualquier daño, y ahora se la entrego a usted un ratito. Tenga el mismo cuidado, se lo ruego encarecidamente. Tengo que ponerme la bata; a mi edad y a estas horas, es lo único que se puede hacer. ¿Qué quiere que le diga?, detesto estar encorsetada —agregó *madame* Grandoni, que daba la impresión de haber evitado esa molestia con bastante éxito y a pesar del traje de ceremonia—. No se quede hasta muy tarde, y no le hagas quedarse, Christina. Recuerda que para un joven activo como el señor Robinson no hay nada más agotador que una vida tan ociosa como la nuestra. Porque, después de todo, ¿qué hacemos? Tiene los ojos muy cargados. *¡Basta!*

Durante todo el pequeño discurso, la princesa, que no había contestado nada a la parte que le correspondía a ella, permaneció oculta detrás del abanico; pero cuando *madame* Grandoni salió bajo el escudo heráldico y se quedó mirando a Hyacinth un momento, dijo por fin:

—No se quede ahí, a media legua. Acérquese a mí. Quiero decirle una cosa y no puedo decírsela a voces.

Él se levantó en seguida, pero ella también se levantó, de forma que fueron a encontrarse a mitad de camino, delante de la gran chimenea de mármol. Estuvo un rato abriendo y cerrando el abanico y luego dijo:

—Debe de estar sorprendido al ver que todavía no le he hablado de lo que tanto nos interesa.

—Pues la verdad es que no; ya no me sorprendo de nada.

—Cuando adopta ese tono, tengo la impresión de que no conseguiremos ser amigos.

—Yo tenía la esperanza de que ya lo éramos. Realmente, después de la amabilidad que ha mostrado conmigo, no hay prueba de amistad que no pueda pedirme…

—Y que no vaya a hacer con muchísimo gusto. Ya sé lo que va a decir, y no pongo en duda que es sincero. Pero ¿de qué iba a servirme la prueba si cree que soy una cabeza hueca y una persona sin sentimientos que se divierte haciendo cosas del peor gusto y agobiándole con mis atenciones? A lo mejor cree que soy una fresca que anda a la caza de coqueteos.

—¿Capaz de coquetear conmigo? —aventuró Hyacinth—. Sería mucha pretensión por mi parte.

—¡Pues después de los avances que le he hecho podría tener todas las pretensiones que quisiera! Haga el favor de decirme, ¿quién puede tener más? Pero usted se empeña en seguir siendo humilde, y eso le pone a una de muy mal humor.

—Pero yo no tengo la culpa; son la vida, la sociedad y todas las dificultades que nos rodean.

Ésa es precisamente mi opinión, que le saca a una de quicio; que cuando yo acudo a usted con franqueza, de una forma inocente y desinteresada —sencillamente porque me gusta, no hay ninguna otra razón— para que me ayude a no tenerlas en cuenta, a saltarme todos esos convencionalismos y absurdos, a tratarlos con el desprecio que se merecen, baja los ojos, se pone un poquito colorado, se empequeñece e intenta escabullirse alegando su insignificancia y su devoción sin límites. Haga el favor de recordar esto: desde el momento en que tiene algo que hacer conmigo, deja de ser insignificante. Amigo mío —continuó la princesa con aquel estilo audaz y fraternal al que su belleza y sencillez conferían nobleza—, hay mucha gente que se daría por satisfecha si pudiera estar en su puesto y tener esa falta de importancia.

—Entonces, ¿qué quiere usted que haga? —preguntó Hyacinth con toda la tranquilidad de que era capaz.

Si había pensado que esa pregunta, al salir de sus labios y habiendo sido hecha con cierta impaciencia, podía resultar chocante y molestarle un poco a la princesa, se había equivocado totalmente. Contestó en seguida:

—Quiero que me dé tiempo. Eso es todo lo que pido a mis amigos, y todo lo que le pedí al mejor amigo que he tenido. Pero ninguno de ellos me lo dio; ninguno, salvo esa extraordinaria mujer que acaba de dejarnos. Ella me entendió desde hace mucho tiempo.

—Eso es también todo lo que le pido yo —dijo Hyacinth con una sonrisa que pretendía mostrar presencia de ánimo, pero que podía haber sido la de un cautivo joven que lucha por su vida—. Deme

tiempo, deme tiempo —murmuró contemplando su esplendor.

—Querido señor Hyacinth, le he dado ya meses, meses enteros desde que nos vimos por primera vez. Y hoy mismo, ¿no le he dado todo el día? Ha sido intencionado lo de no hablar de nuestros planes. Sí, nuestros planes, sé muy bien lo que estoy diciendo. No intente parecer tonto. Con esa cara tan guapa y tan inteligente no va a conseguirlo nunca. He querido dejarle en paz para que se divirtiera.

—¡Ah, y me he divertido! —dijo Hyacinth.

—Habría necesitado ser muy cargante para no hacerlo. Pero, en primer lugar, precisamente por eso yo quería que viniese. Observar la impresión que una casa como ésta causaba en una naturaleza como la suya, que entraba en ella por primera vez, puedo asegurarle que ha valido la pena. Ya le he dado a entender lo extraordinario que me parece que sea usted lo que es sin haber visto —no sé cómo llamarlas— las deliciosas cosas antiguas. He estado observándole; soy lo bastante franca para decírselo. Y quiero que vea más, más, ¡muchas más! —exclamó la princesa con un énfasis que, de habérselo oído decir a otra persona, lo habría tomado por un estallido de ternura—. Y quiero hablar con usted de eso y de otras muchas cosas. Pero vamos a dejarlo para mañana.

—¿Mañana?

—Sí, ya he visto que *madame* Grandoni da por sentado que se marcha. Pero eso no importa. ¡Tiene muy poca imaginación!

Movió la cabeza con timidez, y hasta creyó que estaba decidido:

—No puedo quedarme.

Ella le devolvió la sonrisa, pero había algo extrañamente conmovedor —triste, pero demasiado amable para ser un reproche— en el tono con que replicó:

—No debería tratarme así. No está bien.

No había contado con ese tono; sintió que todas sus razones se venían abajo y quedaban hechas polvo:

—Princesa, no tiene ni idea (¿cómo iba a tenerla?) de la cantidad de preocupaciones en que se mete. No tengo dinero, no tengo ropa.

—¿Y para qué quiere el dinero? Esto no es un hotel.

—Cada día que paso aquí pierdo un jornal. Yo vivo al día de mi jornal.

—Pues entonces déjeme que le dé yo el jornal. Trabajará para mí.

—¿Qué quiere decir que trabajaré para usted?

—Me encuadernará los libros. Tengo muchos libros extranjeros que están en rústica.

—¡Habla usted como si me hubiera traído las herramientas!

—No, ya me imagino que no. Yo le daré el jornal ahora, y puede hacer el trabajo más tarde, cuando le apetezca y le convenga. Además, si necesita algo puede ir a Bonchester y comprarlo. Hay muy buenas tiendas; yo he ido varias veces.

Hyacinth en aquel momento pensaba muchas cosas; ella tenía la virtud de estimularle. Y entre otras cosas pensaba en dos: la primera que no estaba muy bien (aunque no fuera opinión muy firme en Pentonville y Soho) aceptar dinero de una mujer, y la segunda que estaba todavía peor que una mujer como aquélla se pusiese de rodillas delante de él. Pero tardó más de un minuto en decidirse por una de las dos, y antes de que lo hubiera hecho ella continuó en el mismo tono de amabilidad y desinterés:

—Si creemos en la naciente democracia, si nos parece que es justo y que la ola que va a barrer el mundo va a llevarse por delante un millar de iniquidades e injusticias, ¿por qué no hacer una pequeña prueba con nuestros pobres medios (por algo hay que empezar) para poner en práctica su espíritu en nuestras vidas y nuestras costumbres? Es lo que yo quiero hacer. Es lo que trato de hacer, en mis relaciones con usted, por ejemplo. Pero se echa atrás de la manera más ridícula. En realidad, no tiene un pelo de demócrata.

Aquello de acusarle de mantenerse al margen como un patricio era un golpe muy certero; pero le dejó todavía lucidez suficiente (aunque dudó un instante por temor a ofenderla) para decir sin rodeos:

—Me han prevenido mucho contra usted.

La ofensa no pareció afectarla:

—Sí, no me extraña. Desde luego mi forma de proceder —aunque después de todo no es gran cosa lo hecho hasta ahora— puede parecer poco corriente. *Che vuole?*, como dice *madame* Grandoni.

Un lazo de cinta azul claro que formaba parte del adorno del vestido colgaba a uno de los lados entre los pliegues de la falda. Hyacinth había estado mirando los rizos de la cinta, y cogió luego una de las puntas y se la llevó a los labios:

—Haré el trabajo que me encargue. Si sólo me lo da para que me quede y como una muestra de generosidad, eso ya es asunto suyo. Yo señalaré el precio. Y me decido a hacerlo, porque sé que voy a hacerlo mejor que nadie; así es que si me da trabajo tendrá al menos esa razón para dármelo. Ya puede

verlo porque le he traído un libro. Lo hice el año pasado y fui a llevárselo a South Street, pero se había marchado.

—Démelo mañana.

Como esas palabras parecían expresar nada más la tranquilidad que sentía al verle comportarse de un modo razonable y el deseo sincero de ver la prueba de su talento, Hyacinth quedó sorprendido cuando nada más pronunciarlas preguntó:

—¿Quién es el que le ha prevenido contra mí?

Temió que pudiera suponer que se refería a *madame* Grandoni, y dio la respuesta más sencilla, pues no quería traicionar a la señora y pensaba que como la probabilidad de que su amigo de Camberwell consintiera en ver a la princesa era muy remota (a pesar de su propósito de ir allí), nadie iba a salir perjudicado:

—Un amigo mío de Londres, Paul Muniment.

—¿Paul Muniment?

—Creo que mencioné su nombre la primera vez que nos encontramos.

—¿Ese que dijo algo que estaba muy bien? Ya se me ha olvidado lo que era.

—Tenía que estar muy bien si lo dijo él. Es inteligentísimo.

—¡Entonces su prevención me halaga mucho! ¿Qué es lo que sabe de mí?

—Nada, claro, salvo lo poco que yo haya podido decirle. Hablaba sólo en términos generales.

—Me gusta ese nombre tan raro que tiene, Paul Muniment. Si se parece al nombre, creo que me gustará.

—Le gustaría mucho más que yo.

—¿Y cómo sabe lo mucho (o lo poco) que me gusta? Estoy decidida a tenerle conmigo sólo por lo que pueda enseñarme —calló un momento, con sus hermosos ojos como iluminados por todas las posibilidades que le habían deslumbrado y puesto a prueba; luego volvieron a sonar sus maravillosas palabras—. En términos generales, *bien entendu*, su amigo tiene muchos motivos para prevenirle. Ahora, esos términos generales son precisamente lo que yo he tratado de reducir lo más posible. Si le hablo como lo hago, y me comporto como lo he hecho es para dejarlos en nada. ¿Qué estoy haciendo sino inventar toda clase de trucos para llenar el abismo que se abre entre su posición y la mía? Ya sabe lo que me importan las «posiciones», se lo dije en Londres. ¡Por amor de Dios, déjeme pensar que he acertado un poco!

Pudo tranquilizarla lo bastante para que, pasados cinco minutos, no tuviera dudas de que iba a quedarse y empezara a reírse a carcajadas, sustituyendo los argumentos anteriores por una de sus singulares salidas:

—Tiene que ir conmigo a visitar a las Marchant. ¡Será divertidísimo verle allí!

Mientras paseaba por el salón vacío, después de que ella le hubiera dejado de una manera más bien brusca y, en su opinión, con muy poca ceremonia y motivo, se le ocurrió pensar si no querría tenerle allí principalmente para eso, para que la ayudara a jugar alguna mala pasada a los infelices de Broome. Siguió paseando a la tranquila luz de las velas durante más tiempo del que creía; hasta que el mayordomo apareció y se quedó en el umbral de la puerta, mirándole fijo y sin decir nada, como para darle a entender que estaba contraviniendo las costumbres de la casa. Le había dicho a la princesa que lo que le decidía a quedarse era la idea de poner su habilidad a su servicio; pero eso no era más que la mitad de lo que le había impulsado a olvidar todas las reflexiones que se había hecho, cuando en Lomax Place y en una hora de introspección sin precedentes, había escrito la carta en la que aceptaba la invitación a Medley. Tenía que ir, pensaba, porque un hombre debía ser galante, sobre todo si era un pobre encuadernador; pero una vez allí, insistiría a cada paso en conocer cuál era su papel. El cambio que repentinamente se había operado en él era que había dejado de preguntarse en qué consistía el misterio. Todas las advertencias, reflexiones, consideraciones sobre lo que era verosímil, natural o posible, toda idea sobre el valor de su independencia se habían esfumado. Tenía en los labios la copa de una experiencia exquisita, una semana en aquel palacio encantado, sin tener que pensar en Lomax Place y en el viejo Crook, algo que no había soñado en su vida; era una copa teñida de rojo por el vino de la aventura, la realidad y la civilización, y no podía apartarla sin beber. Podía volver a casa avergonzado, pero conservaría el sabor en la boca para siempre. Subió la escalera bajo la mirada del mayordomo y cuando se dirigía a su cuarto, al volver la esquina de un pasillo, se encontró cara a cara con *madame* Grandoni. Parecía acabar de salir de su dormitorio, cuya puerta estaba abierta; podía haber andado por allí vigilando sus pasos. Se había puesto la bata y parecía respirar con mayor facilidad y más a gusto, pero no se había despojado de la peluca. Llevaba todavía el libro francés debajo del brazo, y tenía las regordetas manos cruzadas delante, abrazando su generosa cintura.

—Dígame que sí, señor Robinson —dijo parándose de golpe.

—¿Que sí qué, *madame* Grandoni?

—Que sí coge el tren por la mañana.

—No puedo decírselo porque no sería verdad. Al revés, hemos convenido que me quedo. Lo siento mucho si le disgusta, pero, *che vuole?* —oyó con sorpresa que se aventuraba a decir con cierta displicencia.

Madame Grandoni era una mujer de mucho humor, pero no le devolvió ninguna sonrisa; se limitó a mirarle muy seria durante un momento, y luego, encogiendo los hombros, en silencio pero muy expresivamente, volvió a su habitación arrastrando los pies.

XXIV

—Puedo darle el nombre de su amigo… a la primera. Es Diedrich Hoffendahl.

Habían estado paseando por la mañana cada vez más despacio, y la princesa, al hacer esa declaración, se había parado ya del todo, debajo de un haya grande, mirándole a los ojos, y con las manos llenas de primaveras. Se había desayunado a las doce con ella y con *madame* Grandoni, pero por suerte la vieja señora no había querido acompañarlos en el paseo que la princesa le propuso dar por el parque. Le dijo que su venerable amiga, en las primeras horas de la mañana, había declarado que encontraba de pésimo gusto que no le dejara marchar en paz, a lo que ella había contestado que sobre gustos no hay nada escrito y que otras veces tampoco habían estado de acuerdo sin que por eso pasase nada. Hyacinth expresó su confianza en que no discutieran por culpa de él, que sería lo peor que podía imaginarse, y la princesa le aseguró que ella nunca discutía por nada. Creía que había otras maneras de arreglar las relaciones con la gente; y él comprendió que lo que pensaba era que si el desacuerdo era muy grande, las rompía completamente. Por lo tanto, había muy pocas probabilidades de que ellos llegaran a discutir: sus relaciones serían una gran amistad o no serían nada. La princesa de hora en hora les daba más ese aire, y puede imaginarse lo seguro que se sentiría su invitado, cuando empezó a contarle lo que le había sucedido tres meses antes en Londres, durante una noche, o más bien una madrugada, que había alterado toda su vida, podía decirse que había cambiado los términos en que estaba basada. Comprendía que no sabía muy bien lo que quería decir con esta última frase; pero bastaba para explicar el sentimiento nuevo que se había apoderado de él durante aquel interminable y agotador recorrido bajo la lluvia.

La princesa había llevado la conversación hacia ese tema en cuanto dejaron la casa; y compensó el no hablar de ello el día antes al decir de repente:

—Bueno, dígame ahora lo que pasa con sus amigos. No quiero decir sus amigos mundanos, sino sus colegas, sus hermanos. ¿*Où en êtes-vous* en este momento? ¿Hay algo nuevo, se va a hacer algo? Me temo que no hacen más que perder el tiempo y hablar en balde.

Hyacinth pensaba que desde hacía mucho no había perdido el tiempo ni hablado en balde; pero antes de que pudiera lanzarse a refutar la acusación, ella dijo en un tono completamente distinto:

—¡Qué lata es que no pueda preguntarle nada sin darle derecho a pensar para sus adentros: «¿Después de todo, yo qué sé? ¿No podría estar pagada por la policía?»!

—Eso no se me pasa por la cabeza —protestó Hyacinth muy galante.

—Pero podría pasársele; con lo cual quiero decir que puede ocurrir en cualquier momento. En realidad, creo que debería ocurrir.

—Si estuviera pagada por la policía, no se machacaría la cabeza conmigo.

—Sí, claro, le haría creer que no. Eso sería lo primero que hiciera. Pero en fin, si no tiene que darme la lata con sospechas, mucho mejor —dijo la princesa, que volvió a pedirle que le dijera algo de lo que había entre bastidores.

A pesar de no tener duda alguna sobre su honradez —estaba seguro de que no iba a pasársele por la cabeza la peregrina idea de que era un agente del otro bando— no descubrió inmediatamente todo lo que sabía; pero, pasada media hora, le dijo que el acontecimiento más importante de su vida había tenido lugar poco tiempo antes y de la forma más inesperada. Y para explicar en qué había consistido, dijo:

—Me he comprometido por todo lo más sagrado.

—¿Y a qué se ha comprometido?

—Hice un juramento —un juramento solemne y terrible en presencia de cuatro testigos.

—¿Y sobre qué era ese juramento?

—Aposté mi vida —sonrió Hyacinth.

Le miró de reojo, como si quisiera comprobar si era capaz de mantener una afirmación así; pero no dio

muestras de tomarlo a broma. Dieron unos pasos más, cambiando una mirada en silencio, y ella dijo:

—Entonces, aún me alegro más de que se quedara.

—Ése fue uno de los motivos.

—Preferiría que hubiera esperado a estar aquí —comentó la princesa después.

—¿Por qué hasta haber estado aquí?

—Porque a lo mejor no se habría jugado la vida. Podría haber encontrado varias razones para conservarla —contestó ella, que así se ponía a la altura de Hyacinth en punto a intrepidez.

Él dijo que no le cabía duda de que su influencia resultaba muy tranquilizadora, pero la princesa no hizo caso de sus palabras y añadió:

—Tenga la bondad de decirme de qué está hablando.

—No le tengo miedo a usted, pero no daré nombres —repuso Hyacinth, y contó lo que había ocurrido en ese sitio que él conocía en Bloomsbury y durante la noche de que ya se ha tratado.

La princesa le escuchaba con atención mientras paseaban, haciendo ahora numerosas paradas, bajo los árboles en flor. Desde que la primera pareja buscó la soledad por aquellas lomas verdes y aquellos valles cubiertos de helechos, los viejos robles y hayas no habían florecido nunca bajo el sol ni habían perdido la hoja en noviembre siendo testigos de una serie tan grande de confidencias. Hyacinth, entre otras cosas, dijo que ya no iba al Sol y Luna; comprendía lo que debía haber comprendido hacía tiempo: que aquel templo suyo de la fe, a pesar de todas las maquinaciones que pretendían fraguarse en él, era pura filfa. Había necesitado ser tonto para tomarlo en serio. Lo había hecho principalmente porque un amigo suyo, en el que confiaba, parecía darle ejemplo; pero resultaba que ese amigo (era Paul Muniment, por supuesto) siempre había creído que todos los que iban allí eran un hato de embusteros y los estaba probando, sólo por probarlo todo. No había uno solo a quien se pudiera considerar hombre de primera fila, exceptuando a otro amigo suyo, un francés llamado Poupin, y el mismo Poupin era un hombre magnífico, pero no de primera fila. Hyacinth sabía ya a qué atenerse después de haber visto a un hombre que era la encarnación de la fuerza. Uno comprendía, nada más verse en su presencia, que aquél sí que era un tío de verdad.

—¿En presencia de quién, señor Robinson? —preguntó la princesa.

—No sé si debo decírselo por mucho que confíe en usted. Hablo de ese hombre extraordinario con quien me comprometí.

—¿A dar la vida?

—A hacer lo que en determinado caso pudiera necesitar de mí. Puede necesitar mi pobre pellejo.

—Esos planes «fuertes» están expuestos a fallar… desgraciadamente —murmuró la princesa, pronunciando más de prisa la última palabra.

—¿Eso es un consuelo o una lamentación? —preguntó Hyacinth—. Éste no va a fallar… en lo que de mí dependa. Necesitaban un joven voluntario y, como la plaza estaba vacante, me presenté yo.

—No dudo de que tiene razón. Debemos pagar por todo lo que hacemos. —Expresó esa dura ley con calma y con frialdad, y luego dijo—: Creo que conozco a la persona en cuyas manos se ha puesto.

—Es posible, pero lo dudo.

—¿No puede creer que haya llegado tan lejos? ¿Por qué no? Le he dado bastantes pruebas de que no me quedo atrás.

—Si conoce a mi amigo, ha ido lejos de verdad.

Pareció que la princesa estaba a punto de pronunciar un nombre; pero se contuvo y, en lugar de decirlo, preguntó con repentina impaciencia:

—¿No quieren por casualidad también una joven voluntaria?

—He visto que mi hombre no tiene una gran opinión de las mujeres. No confía en ellas.

—¿Y por eso le considera de primera clase? Pues casi me lo ha descubierto.

—¿Se imagina que no hay más que uno que sea de esa opinión? —preguntó Hyacinth.

—No hay más que uno que la tenga y siga siendo un hombre superior. Es una opinión muy difícil de reconciliar con otras que es importante tener.

—Schopenhauer lo hizo y con éxito.

—¡Cuánto me gusta que conozca al viejo Schopenhauer! —exclamó la princesa—. El caballero que tengo yo en la cabeza también es alemán.

Hyacinth lo dejó pasar sin desafiarla, porque no quería que ella le desafiara a su vez, y la princesa prosiguió:

—Por supuesto que un compromiso como ese de que habla tiene que hacer que todas las cosas resulten muy distintas.

—Para mí ha hecho que tenga ahora una idea muy diferente de la que tenía antes sobre la realidad y la

solidez de lo que se está preparando. Yo andaba sólo por fuera, me quedaba en las escaleras del templo, entre los ociosos y charlatanes, pero ahora he estado en lo más recóndito del santuario. Sí, he visto el sancta sanctórum.

—¿Y es muy deslumbrante?

—¡Huy, princesa! —exclamó el joven arrobado.

—¿Entonces es real, es sólido? Pues de eso es precisamente de lo que yo he estado tratando de convencerme desde hace tanto tiempo.

—Va más allá de cuanto yo pueda decir. Nada está a la vista, pero hay todo un mundo oculto poblado por mil formas de entusiasmo y devoción revolucionarias. Lo que me asombró fue la forma en que está organizado. Yo lo sabía o creía que lo sabía de un modo general, pero la realidad fue una revelación. ¡Y la sociedad vive encima de todo eso tan tranquila! La gente va y viene, compran y venden, beben, bailan, hacen dinero y hacen el amor, y dan la impresión de no saber nada ni sospechar nada ni pensar en nada; y florece la iniquidad y se habla de la miseria de medio mundo como de un «mal necesario», y generaciones enteras se pudren y se mueren de hambre en medio, y todo sigue adelante como si estuviéramos en el mejor de los mundos. Eso no es más que la mitad del asunto; la otra mitad es que todo está condenado. En silencio, a escondidas, pero debajo de los pies de cada uno de nosotros, la revolución vive y trabaja. Es una inmensa y fabulosa trampa sobre la que la sociedad representa sus payasadas. Una vez que la maquinaria esté a punto habrá ensayo general. Para ese ensayo es para lo que me quieren a mí. Los hilos invisibles e impalpables están en todas partes, pasan por todas las cosas y están atados a algunas en donde a nadie se le ocurriría buscarlos. ¿Puede haber algo más extraño e increíble que existan aquí mismo?

—Me hace creérmelo —dijo la princesa, pensativa.

—¡Da igual qué uno se lo crea o no!

—Ha tenido una visión.

—¡*Pardieu*, si he tenido una visión! También la hubiera tenido usted de haber estado allí.

—¡Me gustaría haber estado! —declaró ella.

La princesa respondió de una manera tan ambigua que Hyacinth, al darse cuenta, replicó en seguida con una carcajada incongruente:

—¡No!, lo hubiera estropeado todo. Me hizo ver, me hizo sentir y me hizo hacer todo lo que se le antojaba.

—¿Y por qué se le antojó usted precisamente?

—Pues nada más que porque le pareció que era la persona indicada. Eso es cosa suya: yo no sé que decir. En cuanto encuentra a la persona indicada la ficha. Yo estaba sentado en la cama. No había más que dos sillas en aquel cuartucho, y tenía el abrigo colgado delante de la ventana a modo de cortina. Él no estaba sentado, estaba apoyado en la pared, justo enfrente de mí, y con las manos atrás. Me dijo algunas cosas y mostraba una calma extraordinaria. Yo creo que también estaba muy tranquilo; en realidad, el pobre Poupin fue el único que armó un escándalo. En parte fue por culpa mía: creía que no nos dábamos bien cuenta; quería llamar la atención sobre lo sublime de mi gesto. No tenía nada de sublime, no pude contenerme, sencillamente. Él y el otro alemán estaban sentados en las dos sillas, y Muniment encima de un baúl muy viejo y extraño, forrado de piel, un chisme rarísimo.

Hyacinth no se había dado cuenta de la pequeña exclamación que soltó la princesa al oírle pronunciar en la última frase la palabra «otro».

—¿Y qué dijo el señor Muniment? —preguntó.

—Dijo que estaba muy bien, claro. Ya lo pensaba, naturalmente, desde el momento en que decidió llevarme. Sabía lo que andaba buscando el otro tipo.

—Sí, comprendo —y la princesa añadió después—: Tenemos una manera muy curiosa de quererle.

—¿A quién se refiere al decir «tenemos»?

—A sus amigos. Al señor Muniment y a mí, por ejemplo.

—A mí me parece tan bien como a cualquiera. Pero creo que usted no piensa lo mismo. No sé por qué me parece que lo siente.

—¿Qué es lo que siento?

—Que me haya dejado atrapar.

—¡Vaya!, eso es casi un desaire. ¡Y yo que creía que lo disimulaba tan bien!

Reconocía que su distinción había sido injusta, porque por un momento creyó notar lágrimas en su voz. Ella miró hacia otro lado, y fue entonces cuando se paró de repente y dijo:

—Su nombre es Diedrich Hoffendahl.

Hyacinth se quedó con la boca abierta:

—¡Pues está usted más metida de lo que suponía!

—Ya sabe que no se fía de las mujeres —sonrió ella.

—¿Qué podía yo aclararle entonces si resulta que ha estado en relación con él?

Ella vaciló un momento:

—Usted es muy distinto. Me gusta más.

—¡Ah, si es por eso!

La princesa se puso colorada, como ya la había visto antes, y el que eso pudiera ocurrirle, aunque fuera por segunda vez, era algo inesperado, muy conmovedor.

—No trate de cargar mis inconsistencias sobre mí. Tengo muchas, por supuesto, pero siempre será más amable por su parte pasarlas por alto. Además, en este caso no son tan serias como parece. Como producto del «pueblo» y de ese extraño mundo oculto en fermentación (y es verdad lo que dice), me interesa más y tiene más que decirme que el mismo Hoffendahl, por muy maravilloso que sea, y no dudo de que lo es.

—¿Le importaría decirme cómo y dónde le conoció? —preguntó el invitado.

—A través de un par de amigos míos de Viena, dos de los afiliados; hombres inteligentes y revolucionarios apasionados los dos. Son napolitanos, *poveretti* como usted, y emigraron hace años en busca de fortuna. Uno de ellos es maestro de canto, el hombre más sabio y completo en su género que he conocido. El otro, si no le parece mal, es pastelero. Hace la *pâtisserie fine* más deliciosa del mundo. Me llevaría mucho tiempo decirle cómo los conocí y cómo llegaron a ponerme en relación con el Maestro, como ellos le llamaban y del que hablaban casi sin aliento. No es de ayer (aunque parezca que no pueda creerlo) mi interés por esas cosas. Le escribí a Hoffendahl y recibí varias cartas de él; el maestro de canto y el pastelero salieron fiadores de mi sinceridad. Al año siguiente tuve una entrevista con él en Wiesbaden; pero no puedo explicarle las circunstancias de nuestra entrevista en ese lugar, porque hay otra persona implicada y, al menos por ahora, no tengo derecho a darle una pista. Hoffendahl me causó una impresión tremenda; me pareció el auténtico Maestro, el verdadero genio de un nuevo orden social, y comprendo perfectamente que le impresionara a usted. Cuando estuvo en Londres hace tres meses lo supe, y sabía también adonde tenía que escribirle. Escribí y le pregunté si quería verme en algún sitio. Le dije que me reuniría con él en cualquier parte, en el escondrijo que fuera y quisiera elegir. Me contestó con una carta encantadora, que le enseñaré porque no tiene nada de comprometedora, pero no aceptó mi ofrecimiento, alegando que estaría muy poco tiempo y tenía muchos compromisos. Se atreve a escribirme, pero no quiere confiar en mí. ¡Ya lo hará algún día!

Hyacinth quedó totalmente trastornado al ver el mucho camino que había andado la princesa, y las cosas no mejoraron demasiado cuando, al preguntarle por qué no había exhibido antes sus títulos, dijo por toda explicación:

—Me pareció que la mejor manera de hacerle hablar a usted era callarme.

No era ya nada difícil hacerle hablar y, antes de terminar el paseo, le había contado todo lo que pedía Hoffendahl. Pedía sencillamente que durante los próximos cinco años debía estar dispuesto en todo momento a hacer algo que probablemente le costaría la vida. Lo que tendría que hacer no estaba aún decidido pero podía imaginarse lo que sería al saber que estaba castigado con la muerte. Lo único que se había convenido era que tenía que hacerlo inmediatamente, sin escrúpulos, sin poner condiciones ni hacer preguntas y en la forma que se lo ordenaran desde el cuartel general. Era muy posible que se tratara de matar a alguien, a algún farsante de los que ocupaban un alto puesto; pero si el individuo se lo merecía o no se lo merecía, no había de ser asunto suyo. Si él reconocía siempre la sabiduría de Hoffendahl —y la otra noche le había parecido que brillaba como una espléndida aurora boreal—, no tenía sentido que fuera a discutirla en aquel preciso momento. Había hecho voto de obediencia ciega, el voto de los padres jesuitas al director de su orden. Gracias a que los jesuitas habían cumplido sus votos (y a haber tenido también grandes organizadores), su organización había sido poderosa, y era a conseguir esa clase de poder a lo que las personas que pensaban como Hyacinth y la princesa debían dedicarse. No era seguro que le mataran después de dar su *coup*, como tampoco estaba seguro de cargarse a su hombre; pero era algo que había que pensar muy en serio, con lo que desde luego contaba y lo que en realidad prefería. Probablemente no se molestaría mucho en salvar su pellejo, y no intentaría nunca escapar, esconderse o renegar de su promesa. Si acertaba a colocar la bala, se merecería lo que pudiera ocurrirle. Cuando uno hacía esas cosas era una indelicadeza no estar dispuesto a pagarlas, y él al menos estaba completamente dispuesto. No le correspondía juzgar, sólo le tocaba ejecutar. No pretendía decir qué beneficio iba a derivarse de su trabajito o qué *portée* pudiera tener; no tenía datos para saberlo y se limitaba a creer que en el cuartel general sí sabían muy bien lo que tenían entre manos. La cosa formaba parte de un plan muy amplio cuyo alcance no podía calcular, algo que iba a hacerse simultáneamente en una docena de sitios distintos. La impresión

dependería en gran parte de esa enorme coincidencia. Era de esperar que no lo estropeara algún imbécil. En todo caso, él no iba a dormirse hicieran lo que hicieran los otros. No lo decía porque Hoffendahl le hubiera hecho el honor de contarle el asunto, pero creía que el Maestro sabía elegir a sus hombres. Era seguro que antes de eso no sabían nada de él; los que andaban siempre buscando gente se lo habían propuesto de la noche a la mañana. El caso era que, en cuanto tuvo a Hyacinth delante, reconoció que era el que necesitaba, uno que pudiera pasar por una abertura muy pequeña. Tenía dividida y clasificada a toda la humanidad con auténtica perfección germánica, y por supuesto también desde el punto de vista de la revolución, según pudiera adelantar o entorpecer la causa. El trabajito de Hyacinth era una pequeña parte de lo que Hoffendahl había venido a hacer en Inglaterra; tenía en sus manos muchos otros hilos. Hyacinth no sabía nada de ellos ni tenía grandes ganas de saberlo, como no fuera para admirar la forma maravillosa en que los manejaba sin enredarlos. Tenía sobre ellos el mismo dominio que un gran músico, el mismo que tenía la princesa sobre las teclas del piano, y trataba todas las cosas, personas, instituciones e ideas como si fueran las notas de su gran matanza sinfónica. Llegaría el día en que —allá lejos en la nota más baja de la escala— uno se sentiría tocado por el dedo del compositor, y durante un segundo su voz se dejaría oír de todos con un chasquido pequeño y agudo.

Era imposible que el chico no se diera cuenta de que al cabo de diez minutos había entusiasmado a la princesa y había acaparado su atención: le escuchaba como no le había escuchado nunca. Él disfrutaba con el efecto que producía en ella, y la noción de lo tenue que era el hilo del que pendía su futuro le llevaba a pensar que todo lo que pudiera gozar, cualquier migaja que pudiera arrancarle al festín de la vida, era algo que añadía a la cuenta de su experiencia joven y ávida. El lector puede juzgar si había tenido que contener el aliento y escuchar los latidos de su corazón después de aparecer sobre esa nueva base de persona útil al mundo; pero esa emoción ya se había consumido a través de cien formas de desasosiego, conjeturas vanas y períodos de entusiasmo que alternaban con otros de desesperación, y que conseguía ocultar con mayor éxito del que suponía. Odiaba la idea de que su compañera pudiera notar que le temblaba la voz al contar su historia; pero aunque había llegado a acostumbrarse al peligro y se había entregado, podría decirse, a su consagración, y aunque no podía dejar de resultarle agradable ver que producía escalofríos, como una famosa novela, no podía adivinar lo extraordinarios que le parecían a la princesa su compostura, su lucidez y su buen humor en tales circunstancias. Es verdad que ella trataba de ocultar su asombro, porque no quería dejar de dar la impresión de que incluso una persona como ella estaba preparada para un sacrificio tan completo. Ella tenía el aire —o intentaba al menos tenerlo— de aceptar para él todo lo que él mismo aceptara; sin embargo, había algo forzado en la sonrisa (por otra parte encantadora) con que le contempló mientras decía:

—Es muy serio… realmente es muy serio, ¿no?

Él dijo que la parte seria aún tenía que llegar; pasear por aquel parque tan hermoso y charlar con ella del asunto no le resultaba tan horrendo; y ella comentó que quizá Hoffendahl no llegara a avisarle nunca y que le mantendría todo el tiempo *sur les dents*, en una incertidumbre falsa. Él admitió que eso sería como engañarle, pero que de cualquier forma iba a resultar engañado, aunque fuera de otra manera, y que, en todo caso, habría cumplido con la gran regla de la religión, vivir como si cada hora fuera la última.

—¿Con santidad, quiere decir, en gran *recueillement*? —preguntó la princesa.

—No, no; sencillamente dando gracias por cada minuto añadido.

—Bueno, probablemente va a haber todavía muchos minutos buenos.

—Cuantos más mejor, si son tan buenos como éste.

—Ése no sería el caso con muchos de los de Lomax Place.

—Le aseguro que desde esa noche Lomax Place ha mejorado.

Hyacinth sonreía, con las manos en los bolsillos y el sombrero echado hacia atrás.

La princesa parecía considerar esa extraña verdad con gran curiosidad intelectual, así como el encanto de su aspecto y de la postura que adoptaba:

—Si después de todo no le llaman, habrá sido realmente feliz.

—Sí, habré tenido algunos buenos momentos. A lo mejor todo el plan de Hoffendahl es sólo para eso; puede que Muniment se lo haya propuesto.

—¿Quién sabe? En todo caso, conmigo debe seguir adelante como si nada hubiera cambiado.

—¿Cambiado de qué?

—Desde la primera vez que nos encontramos en el teatro.

—Yo seguiré en la forma que a usted le guste —dijo Hyacinth—. Sólo que la verdadera diferencia estará ahí, ¿sabe?

—¿La verdadera diferencia?

—Sí, que habrá dejado de preocuparme lo que le preocupa a usted.

—No lo entiendo —confesó ella con toda la inocencia de su hermosura.

—¿No basta con que entregue mi vida a la maldita causa sin que tenga que darle también mi simpatía?

—¿La maldita causa? —murmuró la princesa con los ojos de par en par.

—Por supuesto que sigue siendo tan sagrada como siempre; lo que pasa es que la gente a quien compadezco son los ricos, los felices.

—Ya comprendo. Es usted extraordinario. Es estupendo. A lo mejor, a quien compadece ahora es a mi marido —añadió.

—¿Le considera uno de los felices? —preguntó Hyacinth mientras empezaban de nuevo a andar.

Pero ella repitió sin contestar:

—Es extraordinario. Sí, es estupendo.

A lo que contestó él:

—¡Bueno, eso quiero ser!

He transcrito la conversación entera porque representa un capítulo muy importante de la historia de Hyacinth, pero no podemos seguir todas las etapas ni reproducir los pasos por los que quedó confirmada la amistad entre la princesa Casamassima y el muchacho a quien había convertido en su encuadernador particular. Transcurrida una semana, el arreglo que había establecido para sustituir a las desechadas conveniencias había pasado a ser la cosa más justa y conveniente; y durante aquel período, temporada de extrañas revelaciones para el chico, sucedieron muchas cosas. Una de ellas fue el viaje a Broome con su protectora y la visita a *lady* Marchant y sus hijas, episodio que pareció proporcionarle verdadero alborozo a la princesa. Cuando volvieron, le preguntó a la princesa por qué no les había dicho a las señoras quién era. Si no lo sabían, ¿dónde estaba la gracia? Ella contestó:

—Pues sencillamente porque no se lo hubieran creído. Ése es el defecto que tiene usted.

Era la misma observación que había hecho ya el tercer día de su estancia allí, una tarde en que el tiempo se había puesto lluvioso y tuvieron que quedarse en casa. De repente, y sin venir a cuento, había exclamado:

—¡Qué raro que conozca a ese viejo y querido «Schop»!

Él contestó que estaba visto que no podía acostumbrarse a ver que tenía algún talento, y eso los llevó a tener una larga conversación, más larga aún que la ya transcrita, y en la que su confianza quedó mucho más afianzada. Nunca había disfrutado como entonces del placer de la conversación, para él el más grande de los que conocía. La princesa admitió con toda franqueza que él era una persona que necesitaba muchas justificaciones y comentó que sin duda él estaba acostumbrado, pero que debía dar tiempo a los que fueran más tontos:

—He estado observándole continuamente desde que vino, atenta a todos los detalles, y cada vez estoy más *intriguée*. No le he oído ni una sola entonación vulgar, no tiene ni un gesto ordinario, no comete nunca una equivocación, lo hace y lo dice todo justo como debe decirlo. Ha salido de ese pobre cuchitril que me ha descrito, y podía haberse pasado la vida en residencias campestres. ¡Resulta mucho mejor que si lo hubiera hecho! *Jugez donc* por la forma en que le hablo. No necesito hacer una sola concesión, ni la más pequeña. He conocido italianos que tenían ese tacto y elegancia naturales, pero no sabía que pudiera encontrarse nunca en un anglosajón, si no se había cultivado en él y a costa de mucho gasto; salvo quizá en algunas mujeres americanas espantosamente «refinadas».

—¿Quiere decir que soy un caballero? —preguntó Hyacinth, en un tono muy especial y mirando hacia el jardín mojado.

Ella vaciló un poco y luego dijo:

—¡Soy yo la que comete equivocaciones!

Cinco minutos más tarde dejó escapar una exclamación que le conmovió más que nada de lo que había hecho hasta entonces, formó la más alta opinión de su delicadeza y simpatía y le pintó ante sí mismo con sus palabras mejor de lo que pudiera haberlo hecho con un retrato:

—¡Hay que ver qué destino tan raro y tan amargo! Ser como es, darse cuenta de sus cualidades, como tiene que dársela, y tener que contemplar todas las cosas buenas de la vida a través únicamente del cristal del escaparate de una confitería.

—Cada clase tiene sus propios placeres —sentenció él, sin tener en cuenta la emoción de la princesa.

Pero esa observación no enturbió su mutuo entendimiento, que debía alcanzar alturas mucho mayores, y aquella misma tarde, antes de separarse, le contó las cosas que no habían salido nunca de sus labios, las cosas de que se había enterado el día en que le hizo explicarle a Pinnie su visita a la cárcel. En resumen, le contó lo que era.

XXV

Hyacinth había dado varios paseos fuera del recinto del parque y por los alrededores de la comarca, paseos en los que no dejaba de pensar en la «extrañeza» general de su destino, pero que le dejaban también tiempo para disfrutar de la penumbra de los caminos, casi cubiertos por las ramas de los árboles de los senderos que comunicaban los distintos portillos, que eran numerosísimos y parecían tener la llave de la felicidad pastoril, de algún secreto de los campos; contemplaba los bordes cuajados de flores, asombrosamente comunes, pero cuyo nombre ignoraba, el pintoresquismo de los *cottages* con sus tejados de paja, el misterio y la dulzura de las lejanías azuladas, el color de los campesinos, la anticuada costumbre de las niñas pequeñas que le saludaban con una reverencia (homenaje que nunca había imaginado), y sentía el placer de pisar la hierba, cuando sus pies sólo le habían dolido de andar sobre las piedras de las calles. Una mañana, cuando volvía a casa después de un largo paseo, oyó el ruido de los cascos de un caballo, volvió la cabeza y vio a un señor que iba a alcanzarle y que seguía el mismo camino en dirección a Medley. Continuó andando y, al llegar el caballo junto a él, se dio cuenta de que el jinete reducía el paso; miró otra vez y reconoció en el personaje a su pimpante y ocasional amigo el capitán Sholto. El capitán se detuvo, y le saludó con una sonrisa y un movimiento de la fusta. Hyacinth quedó sorprendido: no sabía que la princesa le esperara. No tardó en comprender que efectivamente no le esperaba, y al mismo tiempo observó que todo el equipo de montar de Sholto era el de un «entendido»: las polainas, las espuelas, el puño de la fusta y un curioso chaleco era un nuevo aspecto de los muchos que ofrecía el capitán y que no había tenido ocasión de contemplar hasta entonces. Le pareció estar a una altura tremenda, subido en aquel gran caballo castaño, y observó además que, aunque el caballo estaba acalorado, el jinete se mantenía fresco.

—Buenos días, querido muchacho. Suponía que iba a encontrarte aquí —exclamó el capitán—. Ha sido una suerte haberte encontrado antes de ir a la casa.

—¿Y quién le dijo que iba a encontrarme aquí? —preguntó Hyacinth, preocupado por una suposición tan oportuna y pensando al mismo tiempo, al contemplar a su hermoso amigo a caballo sobre tan hermoso animal, que sería una gran cosa saber montar.

En los dos días que había pasado en Medley había observado que conocer el lujo y ampliar el campo de sus sensaciones engendraba en él el deseo de placeres más osados.

—Bueno, yo sabía que la princesa era capaz de llamarte —dijo Sholto— y me dijeron en el Sol y Luna que no habías estado allí desde hacía tiempo. Por otra parte, sabía que sueles ir con frecuencia. Até cabos, y llegué a la conclusión de que no estabas en Londres.

Todo era claro y directo y podía satisfacer sus exigencias a no ser por la irritante alusión a que la princesa era «capaz de llamarle». Sabía tan bien como el capitán que había sido una tremenda excentricidad hacerlo, pero últimamente se había producido en él cierta transformación y le molestaba que fuera otra persona quien se lo dijera, y mucho más un caballero que pocos meses antes le había dado motivos para pensar mal de él. No había vuelto a ver a Sholto desde la noche en que una extraña combinación de circunstancias le había llevado, de una forma más extraña todavía, a escuchar canciones cómicas sentado entre la señorita Henning y su admirador. El capitán no había ocultado su asombro; Hyacinth tenía su propia opinión y creía que lo hacía para resultar más inocente. Cuando aquella noche acompañó a Millicent a su casa (se habían separado de Sholto al salir del Pavilion) la situación entre la muchacha y su amigo de la niñez era tensa. Se lo demostró en seguida, y le echó una reprimenda, que sin duda quería que fuese memorable, por haber sospechado de ella y haberla insultado ante uno del ejército. El tono que adoptó y la magnífica valentía con que tomó el asunto le dejaron desarmado; acabó por contemplarla con algo de la tensión con que hubiera contemplado a una actriz inteligente, pero poco refinada, mientras ella se entregaba a una exhibición de furia que él creía que era ficticia. Dio más crédito a sus celos y al asunto en general que a los argumentos con que intentaba refutarlo, aunque lo hiciera en voz alta y animado por

movimientos de cabeza y grandes sacudidas de faldas. Hyacinth estaba desconcertado, se sentía provocado y recurrió al sarcasmo, que sólo sirvió para aumentar sus burlas, buscando por fin la solución en una de esas asquerosas salidas francesas, como Millicent les llamaba, y con las que le acusaba de plagar su conversación.

La atmósfera no llegó a aclararse, aunque el motivo de la disputa se olvidó más tarde, pero Hyacinth se propuso vigilar en adelante a su camarada como nunca lo había hecho. Ella también le hizo saber que no le quitaba ojo, y hay que confesar que al poner en práctica el derecho de supervisión Hyacinth se sentía siempre en desventaja desde la noche del teatro. Poco importaba que fuera ella quien le había empujado hacia el palco de la princesa (ella no había tenido celos entonces; tenía demasiadas ganas de saber qué se proponía una persona así, y esperaba quizá atisbar algo) ni que sus relaciones con la gran señora fueran sólo en honor de la humanidad doliente. Fuere como fuere, la atmósfera estuvo cargada de tormenta durante varias semanas y, ¿qué importancia podía tener entonces de dónde vinieran los truenos? Hyacinth estaba muy sorprendido de ver que podía importarle que Millicent le engañara o no, e intentaba convencerse de que no le importaba; pero era como si sintiese que la afinidad personal que había entre ellos era más profunda que cualquier diferencia, y que iba a resultarle un tormento mayor no verla que tener que asistir a uno de esos ataques de furia con los que intentaba encubrir sus andanzas. Algo parecía decirle que su mezcla de belleza y ordinariez, su vitalidad popular, el espíritu de contradicción, y al mismo tiempo el cariño que encontraba en ella habían terminado por hacérsela imprescindible. Le aburría tanto como le irritaba; pero si tenía tan mal gusto estaba también llena de vida, y sus murmullos, su charla, sus maravillosas historias, su mala gramática y buena salud, su sed insaciable, su sagacidad en algunos momentos y sus grotescas opiniones, sus meteduras de pata y sus aciertos eran ya parte de la música familiar de su pequeño mundo. Podía decir para sus adentros que representaba mucho más para él de lo que él representaba para ella, y eso le ayudaba a creer, aunque la deducción no tuviera mucho fundamento, que no estaba divirtiéndose a su costa. Si andaba realmente con un tipo tan encopetado no comprendía que pudiera interesarle conservar a un encuadernador. Hacía tiempo que había dejado de dar importancia a las ambigüedades de Millicent, porque aunque él anduviera por Medley en honor de la humanidad doliente, comprendía que decirlo (en caso de que lo preguntara) iba a resultar tan poco convincente como algunos de los cuentos de la muchacha. En lo referente a Sholto, estaba en una posición muy incómoda, pues le había dado ventaja al aceptar su hospitalidad y sus amabilidades, y no podía pelearse con él como no le diera un nuevo pretexto. El capitán parecía haber tenido cuidado de no dárselo y, después del triple encuentro en la calle, Millicent le había dicho que había hecho que se marchara de Inglaterra ese pobre señor a quien había insultado con sus vulgares insinuaciones casi más (Hyacinth no comprendía por qué «casi más») de lo que le había ofendido a ella. Cuando le preguntó qué sabía de las andanzas del capitán, ella no tuvo inconveniente en decirle que había ido a la tienda para hacer una pequeña compra (unos tirantes de seda, si no recordaba mal, y reconocía que no era más que un pretexto) y le había preguntado con gran interés si su avispado amigo (eso fue lo que le llamó la atención: podía ver lo que pensaba de él) seguía todavía enfadado. Millicent dijo que se temía que sí y que peor para él, a lo que contestó el capitán que no importaba porque iba a marcharse por varias semanas, y que Hyacinth (le había llamado Hyacinth) suponía que no podría preocuparse de un hombre que estaba en el extranjero, y que esperaba que cuando volviera esa nubecilla se habría disipado. Sholto añadió que era mejor que le hablara con franqueza de su visita a la tienda, y le recomendó también que fuera buena con su delicado amigo. Su inocencia y sus precauciones le parecían muy bien; a pesar de ello, Hyacinth se dedicó dos o tres noches a pasar una y otra vez por la calle Queen Anne para ver si descubría alguna señal de que estuviera en Londres. No había luz alguna en las ventanas, y Hyacinth se sintió algo más a gusto al decidirse por fin a llamar a la puerta y preguntar por el inquilino, para ser informado por el soberbio criado a quien ya conocía, y que además tenía todo el aire de llevar una chaqueta de su amo, de que el caballero en cuestión estaba en Montecarlo.

—¿Todavía estás un poco picado? —preguntó el capitán sin ningún rencor.

Y en un momento pasó su larga pierna por encima de la silla, desmontó y empezó a andar al lado de su amigo, llevando al caballo de la brida. Hyacinth fingió no entenderle, pues le pareció que después de todo y aunque no hubiera perdonado todavía al capitán su supuesta traición, estando como estaba a los pies de la princesa, no podía mostrar celos de otra mujer. Pensaba que en un principio la princesa había sido en cierto modo propiedad de Sholto y si, *en fin de compte*, deseaba pelearse con él a causa de Millicent tenía que dejar de dar la impresión de que invadía los dominios del capitán. También se le ocurrió pensar si no habría intentado hacer un cambio, pero en las dos ocasiones en que la princesa había aludido a su amigo militar no había dado señal alguna de reconocer los derechos de ese caballero.

Sholto le dijo que estaba en Bonchester, a siete millas de allí; había venido de Londres y se había

instalado en la fonda. Por la mañana había salido a dar un paseo en un caballo alquilado (Hyacinth creía que era un animal magnífico, pero Sholto hablaba de él como de un jamelgo infernal), y de repente le había apetecido ir a ver qué tal le iba a su amigo.

—Me va muy bien, muchas gracias —dijo Hyacinth con cierta sequedad; no comprendía que el capitán tuviera que meterse en eso.

—Supongo que comprendes el interés que siento por ti, ¿no? Soy hasta cierto punto responsable, fui yo el que te empujó.

—Hay muchísimas cosas en el mundo que no entiendo, pero creo que lo que menos entiendo es su interés por mí. ¿Qué demonio…? —Hyacinth cortó la pregunta, estaba casi sin aliento por la fuerza que había puesto—. Yo, en su lugar, no daría dos peniques por una persona como yo.

—Eso demuestra lo distintos que somos. Pero no lo creo, chico; eres demasiado generoso para eso.

La imperturbabilidad de Sholto parecía aumentar en proporción al mal humor que producía, y era invulnerable al resentimiento provocado por su falta de tacto. Esa falta de tacto se hizo patente una vez más al decir:

—Quería verte aquí con mis propios ojos. Quería ver qué impresión producía la nueva situación doméstica… y realmente es bien extraña. Ya entiendes lo que quiero decir, aunque siempre andas tratando de que te den explicaciones. Yo no me explico bien en ningún sentido, y por eso sólo voy con personas inteligentes que no necesitan explicaciones. Es algo muy grande haberte traído.

—Muy grande, sin duda, pero poco sorprendente si se tiene en cuenta que, como dice, fue usted quien me impulsó.

—¡Huy, eso es una gran cosa para mí, pero no significa nada para ella! —contestó Sholto—. Hay cosas que pueden importarle por sí mismas, pero eso nunca querrá decir que pueda importarle lo que yo haya pensado de ellas. Hoy por ti, mañana por mí. ¡Quisiera que pudieras tú empujarme!

—No le entiendo y no creo que quiera entenderle —dijo Hyacinth, mientras seguían andando.

Sholto le puso la mano en el brazo, y los dos se pararon y estuvieron mirándose un momento:

—Mira, querido Robinson, creo que no estarás echado a perder al cabo de una semana… ¿cuánto tiempo ha sido? No es posible que estés celoso.

—¿Celoso de quién? —preguntó Hyacinth, que en medio de la extrañeza general, no calibraba muy bien la alusión.

Sholto le miró y se echó a reír:

—No me refiero a la señorita Henning.

Hyacinth se apartó y el capitán volvió a acercarse a él, le cogió por el brazo y pasó por el suyo la brida del caballo:

—¡Qué valor, qué insolencia, qué *crânerie*! No hay otra mujer en toda Europa que sea capaz de hacerlo.

Hyacinth guardó silencio un momento, y luego dijo:

—Pues eso no es nada. Tenía que haberme visto el otro día en Broome, en casa de *lady* Marchant.

—¡Santo Dios!, ¿te llevó allí? Habría dado diez libras por verlo. ¡No hay otra como ella! —exclamó el capitán, contento, con verdadero entusiasmo.

—Creo que no hay otro como yo, quiero decir… por ir.

—¿Por qué, no lo pasaste bien?

—Demasiado, demasiado bien. Tales excesos son peligrosos.

—Yo te apoyaré —dijo el capitán, y luego, reduciendo el paso, preguntó—: ¿Hay alguna probabilidad de que la encontremos? No quiero entrar en el parque.

—¿No piensa ir a la casa? —preguntó Hyacinth asombrado.

—No, hijo, no mientras estés tú allí.

—Bueno, le preguntaré a la princesa por usted y terminaremos de una vez.

—¡Golfillo afortunado con tus charlas caseras! —suspiró el capitán—. ¿Dónde se sienta ahora por las noches? No va a decirte nada, salvo que soy un pelmazo inaguantable; pero aunque quisiera tomarse la molestia de arrojar alguna luz sobre mí, tampoco serviría de gran cosa, porque ella es la primera que no me entiende.

—Entonces es usted la única persona del mundo de quien pueda decirse eso —contestó Hyacinth.

—Pues sí, me atrevería a decir que lo soy y estoy más bien orgulloso de ello. Mientras no se trate más que de la cabeza la princesa lo entiende todo. Ya te dije cuando te presenté que era la mujer más inteligente de Europa, y sigo creyendo lo mismo. Pero hay ciertos misterios en los que no se puede penetrar a menos que se tenga ese pequeño y conveniente sentimiento humano que suele llamarse un poquito de corazón. A la princesa semejante cosa no le estorba nada, aunque es seguro que en estos momentos tú crees que es

justo lo contrario. Ya lo verás uno de estos días. A mí no me importa un pito la cantidad de corazón que tenga. Me ha hecho tanto daño que no puede hacerme más, y el interés que siento por ella no tiene nada que ver con eso. Mirarla, adorarla, ver la vida que lleva y cómo se manifiesta su extraordinaria naturaleza, mientras no me dedica más atención que si fuera el cartero que llama varias puertas más allá: eso es lo único que me importa. No saco el menor provecho, pero a pesar de todo es mi principal ocupación. Puedes creerme o no; no tiene la menor importancia, pero soy el ser humano más desinteresado que existe. Ella te dirá que soy el mayor de los asnos, y por supuesto lo soy. Pero eso no es todo.

Esta vez fue Hyacinth quien se paró, detenido por algo que era nuevo y natural en el tono de su compañero, una emoción sencilla que hasta entonces nunca había asociado con él. Se quedó un momento mirándole y pensando una vez más que su destino parecía ser el de recibir las más insospechadas confidencias de la gente distinguida. ¿Qué podían ver en él para rendirle semejante tributo? Era un honor del que podía prescindir muy a gusto; pero al mirar a Sholto veía algo en sus extraños ojos claros —una especie de fidelidad cansada— que hacía que la aventura de aceptar su amistad pareciera menos fantástica:

—Continúe —dijo en seguida.

—Bueno, lo que acabo de decir es el único y verdadero motivo de todo lo que hago. El resto no son más que las palabras que dice el prestidigitador para realizar sus trucos y que no se vea la trampa.

—¿Y qué entiende usted por el resto? —preguntó Hyacinth pensando en Millicent Henning.

—¡Uf!, toda la paja que uno come para engañar el apetito; todas esas tabarras en que uno se mete por ver si conducen a algo, y que luego nunca conducen a nada; todas las monsergas que hemos escuchado juntos en Bloomsbury y las que yo mismo he soltado, ¡demonio!, con una seguridad digna de mejor causa. ¿No recuerdas lo que te he dicho (todo como si fuera opinión mía) sobre el inminente cambio en las relaciones entre las distintas clases? ¡El hundimiento inminente de la corteza terrestre! Yo creo que los que están encima del montón se hallan mejor que los que están debajo, que tienen intención de quedarse allí, y si no son un hato de gallinas, van a quedarse.

—¿Entonces la cuestión social no le importa nada? —preguntó Hyacinth, con aire de no entender nada, del que se daba perfecta cuenta.

—Me dediqué a eso porque se dedicaba ella únicamente. Y no me ha servido para nada —sonrió Sholto —. Querido Robinson, no hay más que una cosa que me importe: mirar a esa mujer cuando puedo hacerlo, y cuando no puedo, acercarme a ella en la forma en que estoy haciéndolo ahora.

—Pues es una forma bastante rara.

—Claro que lo es; pero si es buena para mí debería ser buena para ti también. Lo que quiero que hagas es esto: que la convenzas para que me invite a cenar esta noche.

—¿Que la convenza? —repitió Hyacinth.

—Que le digas que estoy en Bonchester y que no sería más que un acto de caridad.

Siguieron andando hasta llegar a la verja, y entonces Hyacinth preguntó:

—Se dedicó a la cuestión social porque lo hacía ella. Pero ¿sabe por casualidad por qué se dedicó *ella*?

—¡Ay, amigo mío!, eso tienes que averiguarlo tú. Yo te he buscado la plaza, pero no puedo hacerte también el trabajo.

—Ya comprendo, ya comprendo. Pero quizá pueda decirme otra cosa: si hace un año podía ir a verla cuando quisiera, llevarla al teatro y todas esas cosas, ¿por qué no puede hacerlo ahora?

Los ojos de Sholto volvieron a tener una expresión rara:

—*Tú* puedes hacerlo ahora, chico, pero me temo que eso no significa que puedas hacerlo dentro de un año. Entonces ya estaba cansada de mí, y ahora está mucho más cansada, por la sencilla razón de que soy más pesado. Me ha mandado a paseo, pero quiero volver unas horas. Ya ves lo consideradísimo que soy; no quiero cruzar la verja.

—Le diré que me he encontrado con usted —dijo Hyacinth, y luego, aunque no tuviera mucho que ver, preguntó—: ¿Es por eso por lo que dice que no tiene corazón?

—¿Por tratarme como me trata? ¡No, por Dios! Por tratarte a ti como lo está haciendo.

Eso sonaba más que raro, pero no le impidió a Hyacinth dar la vuelta para acompañar a su amigo —porque lo más extraño de aquel encuentro era que la esperanza de hablar un poco con él, si tenía algo de suerte, había sido el motivo no sólo de que Sholto se marchara a Medley, sino de que fuera allí y se quedara en la vecindad, y en una fonda vieja de una ciudad pequeña y aburrida—, no le impidió, como digo, acompañar al capitán a lo largo de una milla en su camino de vuelta. El joven siguió hablando algo más del mismo tema, y descubrió otro par de razones para admirar la naturalidad con la que se había desenmascarado, así como cuál era su interés por la idea revolucionaria, después de haberle preguntado de repente qué le había pasado por la cabeza cuando el verano anterior se encaminó aquella tarde —y no

parecía que hubiera vuelto con tanta frecuencia como prometió— a casa de Muniment, en Camberwell. ¿Qué era lo que buscaba, a quién había ido a buscar allí?

—Buscaba cualquier cosa que pudiera salir, que pudiera chocarle a ella. ¿No comprendes que siempre estoy buscando? Hubo un tiempo en que me dediqué con entusiasmo a los misales miniados, y otro en el que coleccionaba horribles historias de fantasmas (se le había antojado creer en fantasmas) y todo por ella. El día en que vi que empezaba a dedicar su atención a la naciente democracia empecé a coleccionar pequeños demócratas. Fue cuando te conocí a ti.

—Entonces Muniment le entendió perfectamente. ¿Y encontró algo que le sirviera en Audley Court?

—Hombre, pensé que la mujercita de los ojos saltones (me recordaba a un saltamontes metido en la cama) serviría. Y también tomé nota de la otra, la virgen vieja de la gran nariz, la aristocrática hermana de la caridad. Las tengo en reserva para mi próxima ofrenda propiciatoria.

Hyacinth hizo una pausa:

—¿Y el propio Muniment? ¿Puede hacer algo con él?

—¡Huy, hijo mío!, comparado contigo no vale nada.

—Ésa es la primera tontería que ha dicho. Pero no importa portille le gusta tan poco la princesa (lo que sabe de ella) que no consentirá nunca verla.

—¡Ah!, ¿lo toma así? Pues entonces me servirá —dijo Sholto.

XXVI

—Claro que puede venir y quedarse aquí todo el tiempo que quiera —exclamó la princesa, cuando Hyacinth le habló por la tarde de su encuentro.

Hablaba con la dulzura y la absoluta sorpresa que reflejaba siempre su cara cuando la gente (de un modo absurdo según ella) le pedía permiso para hacer algo. Por su forma de acceder a la petición de Sholto —con una facilidad que le quitaba importancia, como si no valiera la pena hablar de eso— el relato que el capitán había hecho de sus relaciones podía pasar por una broma muy bien preparada, pero no menos ridicula. Envió un mensajero a Bonchester con una nota, y Sholto llegó justo a tiempo de vestirse para la cena. La princesa llegaba siempre tarde, y a Hyacinth arreglarse para esos casos le llevaba también mucho tiempo (sentía cruelmente las deficiencias, pero intentaba convencerse de que eran muy honrosas y de que el único atavío digno de él era más o menos su traje de faena); por eso, cuando el cuarto miembro de la reunión bajó al salón, la única persona a quien encontró fue *madame* Grandoni.

—*Santissima Vergine!* ¡Cuánto me alegro de verle! ¿Qué buenos vientos le han traído por aquí? —exclamó en cuanto vio entrar a Sholto en la habitación.

—¿No sabía que vendría? ¿Tan poca sensación ha producido la noticia de mi llegada?

—No sé nada de los asuntos de esta casa. He acabado por dejarlos todos, y ya era hora de que lo hiciera. Me quedo en mi cuarto.

La expresión de la señora no tenía nada de su habitual alegría, más bien reflejaba ansiedad y hasta cierto enfado, y por eso, en aquellos momentos, la buena mujer tenía más que nunca el aire de una dueña que tomaba sus deberes muy en serio. Resultaba casi majestuosa.

—Desde el momento en que ha venido, la cosa mejora un poco. Pero está muy mal.

—¿Muy mal, señora?

—Quizá usted pueda decirme adonde *veut en venir* Christina. Yo siempre le he sido fiel, siempre he sido leal. Pero he perdido la paciencia. Esto no tiene sentido.

—No estoy seguro de saber de qué habla —dijo Sholto—, pero si la entiendo bien, debo decirle que lo encuentro magnífico.

—Sí, conozco su tono, usted es peor que ella porque además es cínico. Esto sobrepasa todos los límites. Es muy serio. He estado pensando qué debo hacer.

—Claro, y yo estoy casi seguro de lo que hará.

—¡Ah, sí, pero esta vez no pienso volver! —declaró la señora—. El escándalo es demasiado grande. Es intolerable. Pero lo que temo es ponerlo todavía peor.

—Querida *madame* Grandoni, no puede ponerlo peor ni mejor —contestó Sholto, que se sentó junto a ella en el sofá—. En realidad, a nuestra amiga no se la puede acusar de escándalo. Está por encima y fuera de tales consideraciones y peligros. Ella lleva adelante todo lo que se propone; toma muy pocas precauciones, no tiene ningún miedo. Aparte de eso, tiene una gran cosa a su favor: que no hace nada malo.

—Pues haga el favor de decirme cómo le llama usted a que una señora envíe por un encuadernador y le traiga a vivir con ella.

—¿Y por qué no enviar por un encuadernador igual que por un obispo? Todo depende de quién sea la señora y de lo que sea la señora.

—Pues tendría que preocuparse primero de otra cosa; de no haberse separado de su marido y de más de un centenar de historias.

—La princesa puede hasta con eso. No es corriente, es una excentricidad, es algo difícil de imaginar, si quiere, pero no necesariamente malo. Desde su punto de vista ella hace lo que debe hacen Además, tiene opiniones propias.

—Sus opiniones son la mismísima insensatez.

—¿Y qué importa —preguntó Sholto—, si eso la hace estar tranquila?

—¡Tranquila! ¿Llama usted a esto tranquilidad?

—Claro que sí, si usted también lo toma con calma. Poniéndonos en el peor de los casos, ¿quién puede saber que es su encuadernador? Es la última cosa que se le ocurriría a uno.

—Sí, en ese sentido le escogió muy bien —murmuró la señora, sin desarrugar el entrecejo.

—¿Quién lo escogió? Fui yo, señora, quien lo escogió —dijo el capitán, soltando una carcajada que demostraba lo poco que le preocupaba el asunto.

—Sí, se me había olvidado. En el teatro —dijo *madame* Grandoni, que le miraba como si tuviera las ideas confusas, pero como si se abriera paso entre ellas cierta repulsión hacia su interlocutor—. ¡Buena jugada le hizo usted allí, pobre muchacho!

—Por supuesto que tendrá que ser sacrificado. Pero ¿por qué tenerle tanta consideración? ¿No he sido sacrificado yo también?

—¡Bueno, si lo lleva como usted! —comentó *madame* Grandoni, casi con un rugido de desprecio.

—¿Y cómo sabe cómo lo llevo yo? Cada uno hace lo que puede —dijo el capitán arreglándose la pechera —. En todo caso recuerde esto: ella no va a decirle a la gente quién es a causa del chico, y él tampoco lo dirá en atención a ella. Y como tiene mucho más aire de poeta, de pianista o de pintor, el escándalo que teme no se producirá.

—Aunque así sea no deja de estar muy mal —dijo *madame* Grandoni—. Y él es capaz de soltarlo cualquier día.

—¡Ah! Si a él no le importa a ella tampoco… Pero eso es asunto suyo.

—Mas es terrible echarle a perder así para su trabajo. ¿Cómo podrá volver?

—Si quiere que se quede siempre aquí, no es usted consecuente. Además, si tiene que pagar por eso, se lo merece. No es más que un abominable conspirador contra la sociedad.

Madame Grandoni guardó silencio un momento; luego miró al capitán con una seriedad que hubiera podido impresionarle de no haber tenido un aplomo a toda prueba:

—¿Qué se merece entonces Christina?

—Todo lo que pueda sucederle; todo lo que pueda hacerla sufrir. Pero no será la pérdida de su reputación. Es demasiado distinguida.

—Ustedes, los ingleses, son muy extraños. ¿Es por ser una princesa? —pensó *madame* Grandoni en voz alta.

—¡Huy, no! Aquí su título no vale nada. En eso podemos ganarla fácilmente. Pero en lo que no podemos ganarla… —El capitán hizo una pausa.

—¿Qué es?

—Pues su total indiferencia ante la opinión pública y la falta de afectación de su originalidad; lo que me ha embrujado a mí precisamente.

—¡Uf, a *usted*! —se le escapó a *madame* Grandoni.

—Si tiene tan mala opinión de mí, ¿por qué dijo hace un momento que se alegraba de verme?

—Porque es uno más en la casa, y así todo resulta un poco más natural; la situación es algo menos (¿cómo dijo?) excéntrica. Mientras esté aquí, no me iré.

—Pues no dude de que proyecto quedarme hasta que me echen.

Le miró con sus ojillos turbados, pero no delataban ningún entusiasmo ante la noticia:

—No comprendo cómo puede gustarle una situación así.

—Querida *madame* Grandoni, el corazón del hombre, sin ser el inexplicable laberinto que es el corazón de la mujer, resulta también bastante complicado. ¿No sé yo lo que va a pasarle al golfillo?

—Es usted un hombre horrible —dijo la señora, y luego, en un tono muy distinto, añadió—: Es demasiado bueno para su suerte.

—Haga el favor de decirme, ¿no lo era yo para la mía?

—¡De ninguna manera! —respondió *madame* Grandoni, que se levantó y se alejó de él.

La princesa había entrado en la habitación acompañada por Hyacinth. Como la hora de la cena había pasado hacía tiempo, la señora supuso que la pareja se había encontrado en el *hall* y había estado hablando allí. Hyacinth miraba con sumo interés la forma en que la princesa saludaba al capitán, que fue la más sencilla, natural y amistosa. Durante la cena no hizo ninguna distinción, y le dejó tomar parte en todo, como si fuera allí un habitual como *madame* Grandoni, aunque, eso sí, un poco menos venerable, y sin darle ocasión en ningún momento a que sus ojos se encontraran. Le había dicho a Hyacinth que no le gustaban sus ojos, y en realidad ninguna otra parte de su persona tampoco. Por supuesto cualquier admiración, viniera de donde viniera, no podía dejar de resultarle agradable, en mayor o menor grado, a una mujer

como ella, pero de todas las impresiones que sin proponérselo podía haber producido, la producida en mala hora sobre el capitán Sholto era la que menos halagaba su vanidad. Era un hombre tan poco interesante, tan superficial, tan inútil y vano, y en realidad tan frívolo a pesar de su pretensión (de la que estaba realmente harta) de vivir obsesionado por una sola idea. Nunca se había interesado por un hombre sólo porque estuviera enamorado de ella; pero sí podía decir que la mayoría de los hombres a los que había gustado tenían también algo, algo en su carácter o sus condiciones, que podía darle que pensar a ella. No tanto como para trastornarla, salvo quizá en uno o dos casos; pero, de todas maneras, algo.

Sholto era un tipo de inglés curioso y no especialmente edificante, como le definió más tarde la princesa; uno de esos tipos raros que producen las sociedades viejas que han dejado de florecer, las civilizaciones corrompidas y agotadas. Era una carga para el mundo, un ser puramente egoísta por mucho que presumiera de desinterés. No era absolutamente nada por sí mismo, y no tenía carácter o mérito alguno salvo por la tradición, la imitación y las supersticiones. Tenía una larga ascendencia, procedía de una rancia familia de la nobleza rural, gente que tenía reputación local, pero que carecía de importancia, y había tenido muchísimo cuidado con su pequeña fortuna. Había recorrido el mundo varias veces, «por la caza», en esa forma criminal y devastadora en que lo hacen los ingleses, para destruir y acabar con otras criaturas más hermosas, más altaneras y más ágiles que ellos mismos. Poseía cierto buen gusto, un poquito de inteligencia, algunas lecturas, unos cuantos muebles buenos, un poco de francés y de italiano (mucho menos de lo que creía), una seguridad sin límites y poquísimo que hacer. En el fondo no era nada más que eso: un lujo inútil, trivial y presuntuoso, algo de lo que lleva a la gente a inventar supuestos deberes porque no tienen ninguno verdadero. La gran idea que Sholto tenía de sí mismo, después de considerarse esclavo de la princesa, era la de ser cosmopolita y estar libre de prejuicios. Sobre los prejuicios la princesa no tenía nada que decir ni le preocupaban tampoco; pero le había visto en países extranjeros, le había visto en Italia, y tenía motivos para decir que no entendía nada de aquella gente. Le había encontrado por primera vez hacía varios años, poco después de casarse. No se había dedicado a adorarla desde el primer momento, lo había hecho poco a poco. Fue después de separarse de su marido cuando empezó a estar siempre alrededor de ella, y cuando más le había hecho sufrir. Sin embargo, algo tenía que agradecerle: nunca, que ella supiera, había tenido el descaro de pretender ser más que un amante desamparado y sin esperanza. Su postura era precisamente esa: quería pasar por el modelo número uno de la constancia no recompensada. Ella no podía imaginarse qué era lo que esperaba, quizá la muerte del príncipe. Pero el príncipe no iba a morirse ni ella deseaba en modo alguno que se muriera. No quería ser dura, porque una cosa así resultaba siempre muy halagadora, pero fuera lo que fuera lo que sentía Sholto, cuatro quintas partes eran puro teatro. No era en modo alguno una persona tranquila, y resultaba en muchos aspectos afectado a consecuencia de no haber tenido que dar golpe en su vida, de no tener gustos serios y de haber nacido, sin embargo, con cierta posición. La princesa decía que se alegraba muchísimo de que Hyacinth no tuviera posición, que se hubiera visto obligado a hacer algo más que divertirse; los amigos que le gustaban eran ésos. Le había dicho a Sholto una y otra vez: «Hay montones de personas a las que les gustaría mucho más estar contigo; ¿por qué no acudes a *ellas*? Esto es perder el tiempo». Estaba segura de que hasta cierto punto había seguido su consejo, y que en lo referente a ella no era en modo alguno el ser absorto y aniquilado por quien pretendía hacerse pasar. Le había dicho una vez que estaba tratando de interesarse por otras mujeres, pero había añadido que no le servía de nada. ¿De qué quería que le sirviese nada de lo que pudiera hacer? Hyacinth, al oírlo, no le dijo a la princesa que tenía motivos para creer que los esfuerzos del capitán en ese sentido no habían sido totalmente inútiles; pero hizo esa consideración para sus adentros y con creciente confianza. Y descubrió una nueva verdad al decir su compañera que, por lo que había visto, el pobre Sholto era una combinación bastante extraña. A pesar de ser bromista tenía también algo siniestro, y confesó que en algunos momentos tenía el presentimiento de que podría hacerle daño algún día. Ese comentario hizo pararse a Hyacinth en el umbral del salón y preguntar en voz baja:

—¿Le tiene miedo?

La princesa sonrió como no lo había hecho nunca:

—*Dio mio!*, ¿cómo dice eso? ¿Querría matarle por mí?

—Ya sabe que tendré que matar a alguien. Pues si estoy dispuesto, ¿por qué no había de ser él si es el que le preocupa?

—¡Huy, amigo mío, si tuviera que empezar a matar a todos los que me preocupan! —suspiró la princesa, mientras los dos entraban en el salón.

XXVII

Nada más ver asomar por la entreabierta puerta la cara de *lady* Aurora, comprendió que algo iba mal. ¿Qué estaba haciendo en el dormitorio de Pinnie? Un cuarto muy pobre en el que la modista, con todo su respeto, nunca hubiera dejado entrar a una persona tan importante a menos que las cosas fueran muy mal. *Lady* Aurora no tenía su habitual sonrisa incoherente; se había quitado su gran sombrero con el velito anticuado, y se llevó el dedo a los labios. La primera alarma de Hyacinth fue inmediata, nada más abrir la puerta de la calle, con la llave, como hacía siempre, y ver que el cuartito que estaba a la derecha del pasillo, en el que Pinnie se había pasado la vida, estaba vacío y con el fuego apagado. En cuanto pagó al cochero que le había llevado el equipaje hasta el vestíbulo —no tenía costumbre de pagar a cocheros y comprendía que le había dado demasiado, pero estaba muy nervioso para preocuparse—, subió corriendo la infame escalera, que aun en aquellos momentos le pareció más infame que nunca, dio unos golpecitos en la puerta y llamó con una voz lo menos temblorosa posible, a la que *lady* Aurora contestó en seguida. Había vuelto a entrar en el cuarto, mientras él estaba allí sin saber qué hacer; luego apareció otra vez, cerró la puerta tras ella y le hizo señas de que estuviera lo más callado posible. Se sintió de repente tan mal ante la idea de haber estado perdiendo el tiempo en Medley mientras había una desgracia en la pobre casucha a la que tanto debía, que apenas tuvo fuerzas para hacer una pregunta y obedeció mecánicamente el gesto de su noble visitante que le indicaba que bajara con ella.

Hasta que estuvieron solos en la salita desierta —donde por primera vez notó el desagradable olor que había—, no acertó a preguntar:

—¿Se está muriendo?, ¿ha muerto?

La tristeza que se veía en la cara de *lady* Aurora no parecía anunciar nada mejor.

—Querido señor Robinson, lo siento mucho por usted. Quería escribirle, pero a ella le prometí que no lo haría. Está muy mala la pobre; estamos muy preocupados. Empezó hace diez días, y creo mi deber decirle que ha perdido mucho.

Lady Aurora hablaba con más miramientos y precauciones que nunca, con ansiedad y como si le costara mucho trabajo: haciendo una pequeña pausa después de cada diálogo para ver cómo lo tomaba, y lanzándose luego un poco en cuanto veía un momento propicio. Se enteró de lo que pasaba, de que habían llamado a un médico y de que si esperaba un poco a entrar en el cuarto sería mucho mejor, pues la enferma se había dormido algo más tranquila que antes y sería una pena correr el riesgo de despertarla. A juicio de su señoría, el médico le estaba dando las medicinas apropiadas, pero decía que tenía muy pocas reservas. No se trataba de un médico famoso: era el doctor Buffery, que vivía allí cerca, pero parecía un hombre muy inteligente; y ella se había tomado la libertad (al confesarlo soltó una de sus extrañas risitas y se puso colorada) de llamar a una enfermera, una mujer mayor, muy respetable y conocida. En aquel momento estaba fuera, tenía que salir una vez al día a tomar el aire; «sólo cuando yo vengo, por supuesto», se apresuró a aclarar *lady* Aurora. La pobre *miss* Pynsent hacía tiempo que arrastraba un catarro y no se había cuidado. Hyacinth debía de saber lo valiente que era; no se preocupaba nada de sí misma. «Pero claro, un catarro es un catarro para todo el mundo, ¿no?», comentó como para demostrar que no compartía la opinión de que la clase baja podía liberarse de tales plagas. Diez días antes se había enfriado aún más al quedarse por la noche dormida en la silla y con el fuego apagado.

—Eso no habría sido nada para una persona como usted o como yo; pero, al estar tan débil, fue muy distinto. El día era terriblemente húmedo, el frío penetró en los pulmones y produjo una inflamación. El doctor Buffery asegura que estaba muy agotada, ¿comprende?, muy débil y sin defensas, y no tenía con qué salir adelante.

Al día siguiente tuvo muchos dolores y bastante fiebre, pero a pesar de todo se levantó. El ángel tutelar de la pobre Pinnie no le aclaró a Hyacinth el tiempo que había pasado antes de que llegara en su auxilio, ni

quién le había avisado, y comprendió que se saltaba esa parte por el encomiable deseo de evitar que pensara que la enferma había sufrido por causa de su ausencia o le había llamado en vano. En realidad, no parecía que fuera ese el caso, ya que se había opuesto repetidamente a que le escribieran.

—Yo vine en seguida —dijo únicamente *lady* Aurora—: fue una suerte tremenda. Y desde entonces ha tenido todo lo que necesitaba, aunque resultaba muy triste ver que una persona *necesitara* tan poco. Quería que se quedase donde estaba; se ha aferrado a esa idea. Lo que le digo es la pura verdad, señor Robinson.

—No sé qué decirle, es usted extraordinariamente buena, angelical —contestó Hyacinth asombrado y sintiendo una extraña e inesperada vergüenza.

El episodio que acababa de vivir, el esplendor que había conocido y disfrutado tanto, la alianza tan antinatural que había establecido mientras su pobre madre adoptiva luchaba sola con la muerte —comprendía que era eso, el presentimiento, el horror final se palpaban allí—, todo ese contraste se le clavaba como un cuchillo y hacía que el desgraciado accidente de su ausencia se transformara en pura maldad suya.

—No puedo reprocharle nada siendo tan buena, pero hubiera deseado con toda mi alma saberlo —dijo por fin.

Lady Aurora cruzó las manos, suplicándole que no la juzgara mal:

—Para nosotros desde luego era una gran responsabilidad, pero pensamos que debíamos tener en cuenta lo que ella nos pedía. Insistía constantemente en que su visita no debía interrumpirse. Cuando volviera por propia voluntad habría tiempo de sobra. Yo no sé exactamente dónde ha estado, pero ella decía que era una casa preciosa. Repetía una y otra vez que iba a beneficiarle mucho.

Hyacinth notó que los ojos se le llenaban de lágrimas:

—¡Se está muriendo, se está muriendo! ¿Cómo va a poder vivir así?

Se dejó caer sobre el viejo sofá amarillo, el sofá de toda su vida y de muchos años antes, y escondió la cabeza en el brazo sucio y desgastado. Una serie de sollozos salieron de su boca, sollozos en los que estaba acumulada la emoción de varios meses, y el extraño y agudo conflicto que le había embargado durante las tres últimas semanas encontró en ellos alivio y una especie de solución. *Lady* Aurora estaba sentada junto a él, y le acariciaba la mano con la punta de los dedos. Durante un minuto, mientras corrían sus lágrimas y ella permanecía callada, notó su tímido toque de consuelo. Luego levantó la cabeza; recordó que había dicho «nosotros» y preguntó a quién se refería.

—¡Ah, a mister Vetch! ¿No lo sabe? He tenido el gusto de conocerle; es imposible ser una persona más buena.

Después, mientras Hyacinth guardaba silencio atormentado por la idea de que Pinnie había tenido que depender del violinista mientras él se daba la gran vida, *lady* Aurora añadió:

—Es un músico encantador. Al principio, ella le pidió una vez que trajera el violín; creía que iba a calmarla.

—Le estoy muy agradecido, pero ahora que he llegado, no hace falta que le molestemos —dijo Hyacinth.

Parecía haber cierta sequedad en sus palabras, y eso fue la causa de que su señoría, después de varias dudas, se decidiera a decir:

—¡Déjele venir, señor Robinson; déjele estar a su lado! No sé si sabe que… que le tiene un gran afecto.

—Pues es bien tonto, porque siempre le he tratado muy mal —dijo Hyacinth, azorándose.

La forma en que hablaba *lady* Aurora le demostró más tarde que ya conocía su secreto, o más bien uno de aquellos misterios; porque tal como habían ido las cosas en los últimos meses, estaba haciendo una verdadera colección. Sabía el secreto pequeño, no el grande, por supuesto; se veía que las divagaciones de Pinnie le habían hecho la luz. En el mismo momento en que lo pensaba, se sintió casi sorprendido al ver que esas pequeñas delaciones no le hacían ya la menor mella, y lo poco que parecía significar de repente que la fuente de los rumores fuera a secarse. El sentido de poseer un tesoro de experiencias mucho mayor se tragaba esa ansiedad particular y le hacía preguntarse qué importaba, para el poco tiempo que le quedaba, que la gente cuchicheara a escondidas sobre la marca secreta que llevaba. No tardó en llegar el día en que creía, y no le importaba nada, que era mucho lo que habían hablado de él.

Después de dejarle *lady* Aurora, con la promesa de llamarle en cuanto fuera prudente, se puso a dar paseos por el frío saloncito, sumido en sus meditaciones. La conmoción ante el peligro de perder a Pinnie ya se le había pasado; había avanzado tanto últimamente en la aceptación de la idea de la muerte, que el hecho de que la pobre modista desapareciera parecía ya casi beneficiarse de tan curioso adiestramiento. Lo que se le presentaba con más fuerza en el escenario abandonado de su trabajo era la visión tan distinta con que contemplaba los objetos que le habían sido familiares durante veinte años. El cuadro seguía siendo el mismo, y todos sus horrendos elementos, cubiertos por una especie de brillo grasiento en el sucio aire de

Lomax Place, producían, a través de las pequeñas ventanas, un *chiaroscuro* lúgubre; mostraban, en su mísero brillo, el roce de su propia vida, pero los ojos con que los miraba tenían otros términos de comparación. Siempre había tenido la escena por sórdida y horrenda, pero su aspecto le parecía tan lastimoso que casi le ponía malo; no podía comprender que lo hubiera aceptado durante años y hasta lo hubiera reverenciado un poco. Estaba asustado de ver el flaco servicio que le había hecho su experiencia de grandezas. Estaba muy bien haberlo asimilado y con una rapidez de la que él mismo se sorprendía, pero con una sensibilidad tan mejorada, ¿cómo llegar a un arreglo con lo más humilde, con lo que por su propia naturaleza no podía rendirse? Aunque la primavera estaba ya muy avanzada, el día era oscuro y lluvioso, y la habitación tenía la pegajosidad del mucho uso, rezumaba la humedad de la calle embarrada, donde la única defensa era una estrecha zanja. No era nada raro que Pinnie lo hubiera sentido por fin, no era raro que su desnutrido organismo hubiera llegado a entumecerse y dejara de funcionar. Al pensar en su vida tan limitada, en su esfuerzo paciente y monótono con la aguja y las tijeras, que había terminado en un saloncito en el que no había nada que exhibir y en meditar sobre el corte de mangas que ya estaban pasadas de moda, se le saltaron las lágrimas otra vez; pero se las limpió al oír una débil llamada en la puerta, que abría en aquel momento la criadita que habían conservado para el servicio del solitario huésped, un hombre que se asombraba fácilmente, tenía un estrabismo especialmente lamentable y ponía malo a Hyacinth por llevar unos zapatos que no casaban, aunque los dos tenían la misma antigüedad y los dos rivalizaban en su facilidad para salírsele. No había oído la voz de mister Vetch en el vestíbulo, porque hablaba muy bajo; pero el joven no se sorprendió cuando, después de tomar todas las precauciones para que no crujiera la puerta, su vecino entró en el saloncito. Al principio el violinista no le dijo nada; los dos se miraron durante un minuto muy largo. Hyacinth vio pronto lo que más deseaba ver: si estaba ya enterado de lo de Pinnie; pero algo más que había en sus ojos, que tenían una expresión muy distinta a la que hasta entonces había visto en ellos, iría descubriéndolo poco a poco.

—¿No le parece que debía haberme puesto unas letras? —preguntó Hyacinth por fin.

Su enfado por haberle ignorado se le había pasado ya, pero le parecía bien hacer la pregunta. Esperaba una respuesta sarcástica, pero quedó sorprendido por la amabilidad con que mister Vetch contestó:

—Te aseguro que en toda mi vida he tenido una responsabilidad que me agobiara más. Había muchas razones para decirte que volvieras y, sin embargo, me resultaba imposible no desear que terminaras la visita. Estuve dudando entre ambas cosas. Era muy difícil.

—Pues a mí me parece facilísimo. Cuando la gente más próxima y más querida para uno se está muriendo, generalmente avisan.

Mister Vetch se disculpó con una extraña sonrisa. Si Lomax Place y la selecta casa de huéspedes de *miss* Pynsent ofrecían a los ojos de Hyacinth tanta vulgaridad, puede imaginarse hasta qué punto se prestaban a hacer comparaciones la renuncia a los primores del vestir y el abandono resignado que marcaban la vejez del violinista. El reluciente mayordomo de Medley ofrecía muchos más indicios de prosperidad.

—Hijo mío, este caso era excepcional —dijo el violinista—. Tu visita parecía algo importante.

—No sé que podrá saber de ella. No recuerdo haberle dicho nada.

—No, realmente nunca me has dicho demasiado. Pero si como supongo has visto a esa señora tan amable que ahora está arriba, estarás enterado de que Pinnie daba muchísima importancia a que no se te molestara. Nos amenazó con enfadarse si te hacíamos volver. ¡Y ya sabes lo que son los enfados de Pinnie!

Al ver que Hyacinth se apartaba un poco con gesto de mal humor, mister Vetch añadió:

—No hay duda de que la pobre tiene unos caprichos absurdos; pero no los tomes a mal. Estoy seguro de que si hubiera estado aquí sola, sufriendo, agotándose, sin un ser que la atendiera y sin más perspectiva que morirse en un rincón como un gato, habría preferido resignarse a su suerte antes que acortar en una hora tu novelesca experiencia.

Hyacinth lo echó a perder completamente:

—Por supuesto que entiendo lo que dice. Pero es ella la que se ha tejido esas ilusiones, lo ha hecho siempre, y además no se sabe de dónde las ha sacado. No puedo imaginarme qué es lo que sabe de esta «experiencia» ni de ninguna otra. Cuando salí de Londres le dije muy poco más que a usted.

—Lo que ha adivinado, lo que ha ido sacando de un lado y otro ha sido suficiente. Está convencida de que has entablado alguna relación por medio de la cual llegarás a los tuyos. Para ella, la aristocracia es una sola cosa, y no ve nada más sencillo que el que esa persona que te ha invitado (de gran alcurnia según cree) se ocupe en aclarar tus asuntos por medio de sus amigos.

—Bueno, muy bien, me alegro de no haberlos privado de esa diversión.

—Te aseguro que el espectáculo era algo exquisito —dijo el violinista—. No le quites esa idea de la cabeza, por favor.

—¿Que no se la quite? ¡Voy a hacer mucho más! —contestó Hyacinth—. Voy a decirle que mis parientes me han adoptado y que he vuelto transformado ya en lord Robinson.

—No necesitará nada más para morir feliz.

Cinco minutos más tarde, después de haber obtenido Hyacinth por parte de su viejo amigo la confirmación de lo que le había dicho *lady* Aurora sobre el estado de *miss* Pynsent, a la que el violinista veía media docena de veces al día, cinco minutos más tarde reinaba el silencio en el saloncito y el chico esperaba que *lady* Aurora le avisara que podía subir. El violinista, que había encendido la pipa, miraba por la ventana, como si lo que veía fuera un mapa de todo aquel gris pasado. Hyacinth, procurando no hacer ruido paseaba por la habitación con las manos en los bolsillos. Por fin, mister Vetch, sin sacarse la pipa de la boca ni volver la vista, dijo:

—Yo creo que a estas alturas y en un momento semejante podrías ser un poco más franco conmigo.

Hyacinth se paró, asombrado realmente de lo que decía su amigo, pues no creía estar haciendo ningún esfuerzo por ocultar nada que pudiera decir —había cosas que desde luego no podía decir— y creyendo por el contrario que su vida estaba singularmente abierta a la consideración del público y expuesta a comentarios envidiosos. En ese momento apreció por primera vez cierta diferencia; la voz de mister Vetch tenía un tono que no había notado antes; faltaba en ella la nota que otras veces le había llevado a pensar que aquel viejo impenetrable se estaba divirtiendo a sus expensas. Era como si hubiera cambiado su actitud, como si se hubiese hecho más considerada a consecuencia de algún cambio o mejora por parte de Hyacinth, que era ya mayor o más importante o se había convertido en algo definitivamente extraño. Si la primera impresión que le había hecho el viejo vecino de Pinnie, que tanto le había dado que pensar en otro tiempo por si era un caballero o formaba parte del pueblo soberano, y si debía o no estar en la lista de los sacrificados; si el sentimiento que había provocado en una mente familiarizada durante casi un mes con formas de indudable elegancia no era favorable a la fraternización, esa secreta impaciencia desapareció del pecho de Hyacinth gracias a una de esas reacciones súbitas o rápidos cambios que el chico padecía con tanta frecuencia. Ante la petición del violinista, que era evidente significaba más de lo que decía, ante su aspecto rancio, el aire inconfundible de algo que se ha usado durante años y ha cogido todas las arrugas y vicios del uso, el testimonio mismo de una irremediable tacañería y de haber dejado de preocuparse por la forma de los pantalones porque había otras cosas que le preocupaban más, se transformó en otras tantas razones para cambiar, para volver a él, en claras señales de una fidelidad invencible, de una vida dedicada únicamente a cumplir con un deber cotidiano y con un arte que después de todo era muy bonito; y lo había hecho mientras otras personas como las que nuestro hijo pródigo había tratado últimamente pasaban de una sensación egoísta a otra y ni siquiera podían vivir tres meses seguidos en el mismo sitio.

—¿Qué le gustaría que hiciera, que dijera o que le contara? ¿Quiere saber lo que he estado haciendo en el campo? Tendría que empezar por saberlo yo mismo —dijo Hyacinth con toda sinceridad.

—¿Lo has pasado bien?

—Sí, desde luego, muy bien… sin saber nada de Pinnie. He estado en una casa preciosa con una mujer preciosa.

Mister Vetch se había vuelto; tenía un aire muy imparcial entre el humo de su pipa:

—¿Es realmente una princesa?

—No sé lo que quiere decir con «realmente»: a mí me parece que iodos los títulos no son más que basura. Mas parece que todos están de acuerdo en decir que es princesa.

—Ya sabes que siempre me ha gustado meterme en tu vida, y ese deseo es hoy más fuerte que nunca —dijo el viejo, que no apartaba sus ojos de los del chico.

Hyacinth le miró un momento también:

—¿Y qué le hace decirlo en este momento?

El violinista pareció pensarlo, y dijo por fin:

—Porque estás en peligro de perder a la mejor amiga que has tenido en tu vida.

—Puede estar seguro de que lo comprendo. Pero si le tengo a usted…

—¡Huy, a mí! Yo soy muy viejo y estoy cansado de la vida.

—Supongo que es a eso a lo que llega uno. Pero si puedo ayudarle en alguna forma, tiene que contar conmigo, tiene que acudir a mí.

—Eso es precisamente lo que iba a decirte. ¿Querrías algo de dinero?

—¡Claro que lo querría! Pero ¿por qué iba a dármelo usted?

—Porque al ir ahorrándolo poco a poco siempre me he acordado de ti.

—Se acuerda usted demasiado de mí, mister Vetch. No me lo merezco, haga el favor de creerme, y por muchos motivos. Habría ganado bastante dinero para lo que necesito o tengo derecho a querer quedándome

tranquilo en Londres y acudiendo a mi trabajo. Ya sabe que puedo ganarme la vida.

—Sí, eso ya lo veo. Pero si te hubieras quedado tranquilamente en Londres, ¿qué habría sido de tu princesa?

—¡Uf! Las señoras que están en esa posición siempre pueden arreglárselas.

—¡Menuda si entiendo su posición! —exclamó mister Vetch, pero sin reírse—. Te has pasado tres semanas sin trabajo y no puedes tener un aspecto más elegante.

—Bueno, no he tenido que gastar nada para vivir, ¿comprende? Cuando está uno con gente rica, no tiene que pensar en la cuenta —explicó Hyacinth con mucha amabilidad—. Aparte de eso, la señora de cuya hospitalidad he disfrutado me ha hecho una oferta de trabajo estupenda.

—¿Qué clase de trabajo?

—El único que sé hacer. Va a mandarme muchos libros para que se los encuaderne.

—¿Y a pagarte un precio fantástico?

—No, eso no. Soy yo el que fijará el precio.

—¿Y esa clase de transacciones no resulta más bien desagradable si se hace con una señora de cuya hospitalidad se ha disfrutado? —preguntó mister Vetch.

—¡Muchísimo! Por eso pienso arreglar los libros y no cobrar nada después.

—¡Es bastante lista tu princesa! —rió con cierta frialdad el violinista.

—No puede obligarme a cogerlo si no quiero —dijo Hyacinth.

—No, lo único que tienes que hacer es dejarme eso a mí.

—Tiene ideas bien curiosas a propósito de mí —declaró el chico.

Mister Vetch se volvió otra vez hacia la ventana, diciendo que tenía ideas muy curiosas a propósito de todo. Después de una pausa añadió:

—¿Y has estado haciendo el amor a tu gran señora?

Esperaba un estallido de impaciencia como respuesta, pero quedó más bien sorprendido al ver la forma en que Hyacinth empezaba a decir:

—¿Cómo podría explicárselo? No se trata de eso.

—¿Entonces ha sido ella la que ha estado haciéndote el amor?

—Si pudiera verla, comprendería lo absurda que esa suposición es.

—¿Cómo podré verla alguna vez? Pero a falta de ese privilegio, creo que mi idea tiene algún fundamento.

—Está muy por encima de mí —dijo Hyacinth con toda naturalidad—. Pero no es imposible que pueda verla. Quiere conocer a mis amigos, conocer a la gente que vive en el Place. Y sentiría un interés especial por usted a causa de sus opiniones.

—¡Ya no tengo opiniones, no me queda ni una! —dijo con tristeza el viejo—. Las tenía sólo para asustar a Pinnie.

—Se asustaba fácilmente —comentó Hyacinth.

—Sí, y se tranquilizaba fácilmente también. Bueno, quiero saber algo de tu vida. Pero ten cuidado de que la gran señora no te lleve demasiado lejos.

—¿Qué quiere decir demasiado lejos?

—¿No es una socialista dedicada a conspirar y a tramar intrigas y traiciones? ¿No aspira a una rectificación general, como dice Eustache?

Hyacinth tardó un poco en contestar:

—Tendría que ver el sitio, ver cómo viste, lo que come y lo que bebe.

—¡Ah! ¿Quieres decir que no vive de acuerdo con sus teorías? Hijo mío, sería una mujer especial si no lo hiciera. De todas maneras, me alegro.

—¿Se alegra?

—Me alegro por ti, quiero decir, cuando estás con ella. ¡Es un lujo mucho mayor! —exclamó mister Vetch, sonriendo.

En ese momento, un golpecito dado por *lady* Aurora en el piso de arriba anunció que Hyacinth podía subir a ver a Pinnie. Mister Vetch reconoció el sonido y eso le hizo decir con bastante fuerza:

—¡Ahí tienes a una mujer cuya conducta y teorías sí que cuadran!

Hyacinth, que iba a salir de la habitación, se paró un momento para contestar:

—Bueno, cuando llegue el día en que mi amiga se decida… ya verá.

—Sí, no me cabe duda de que hay cosas a las que podría renunciar —contestó el viejo, pero Hyacinth ya no podía oírle.

XXVIII

Mister Vetch esperó allí hasta que *lady* Aurora bajara a darle las noticias que estaba impaciente por saber. No se forjaba ilusiones respecto a Pinnie. La noche anterior le había parecido ver que llevaba la muerte escrita en la cara, y creía que no era mal momento para que la pobre abandonara su carga. Tenía razones para creer que el futuro no iba a ser agradable para ella. En lo concerniente a Hyacinth, no se sentía nada tranquilo; porque aunque sabía más o menos que andaba metido con gentes extrañas, y aunque había dicho siempre que se alegraría de ver que salía adelante y resolvía el problema de su peregrina ascendencia, estaba preocupado por no tener un conocimiento exacto. Apagó la pipa, anticipándose a la reaparición de *lady* Aurora y, al prescindir de ese consuelo, se le agudizó el miedo que le había entrado pocos días antes, a raíz de una conversación, o más bien un intento de conversación, con Eustache Poupin. Fue a través del francés como conoció lo poco que sabía de la extraña aventura de Hyacinth entre la alta sociedad. Y su visión del asunto había sido puramente deductiva; Hyacinth no le había explicado a Pinnie por qué se marchaba, y sólo le había dado a entender que había una señora en el asunto y que, por muy buen equipaje que llevara y por muy bien planchadas que estuvieran sus camisas, sería poco. Poupin había visto a Sholto en el Sol y Luna, y por medio de Hyacinth había llegado a la conclusión de que una influencia femenina muy notable era en gran parte responsable de la presencia del capitán en Bloomsbury, una influencia que, para bien o para mal, Hyacinth estaba igualmente expuesto a sentir. Para el chico, Sholto era el lazo de unión visible con una sociedad para la que Lisson Grove no podía tener una importancia general, salvo para emplearla como atajo (muy desagradable si se hacía con frecuencia) más allá de Bayswater; por lo tanto, si Hyacinth se había marchado de Londres con un sombrero nuevo y un par de guantes de cabritilla tenía que haberlo hecho en dirección a ese círculo superior y más o menos movido por esa influencia femenina. Eso fue lo que el francés dio a entender al violinista, y con bastante claridad como era su costumbre; pero había otras notas en su conversación, unas referencias raras, que excitaron la curiosidad de mister Vetch pero no pudieron satisfacerla. Eran unas suposiciones más profundas y oscuras que sin duda le resultaban penosas al francés, que no llegaba a aclararlas ni a darles ese toque final que caracterizaba normalmente las más ligeras alusiones de *monsieur* Poupin. Al violinista se le antojaba que su amigo tenía algo en la cabeza que no le estaba permitido decir, y que además se refería a Hyacinth y podía ser causa de no poca ansiedad para quienes se interesaban por el singular muchacho. Mister Vetch, por su parte, fue dándole una forma a esa ansiedad: se convenció de que el francés había llevado al chico demasiado lejos en la línea de la crítica social, y hasta le había empujado hacia algún sendero sinuoso en el que un resbalón equivalía a un accidente. Cuando en otra ocasión dejó entrever sus temores a Poupin, el encuadernador se puso muy colorado y declaró que su conciencia era pura. Una de sus peculiaridades era que cuando se le subían los colores daba la impresión de estar enfadado, y mister Vetch pensó que el enfado se debía a que, a pesar de sus protestas, no había actuado con mucha prudencia; aunque antes de separarse, y como signo de apaciguamiento, derramó lágrimas de emoción, cuyo origen el violinista no veía muy claro, pero que le parecían más o menos dedicadas a Hyacinth. La entrevista tuvo lugar en Lisson Grove, pero *madame* Poupin no apareció por ninguna parte.

El viejo, en resumen, se sentía presa de sospechas que le llevaban a pensar cómo se le había pasado ya el entusiasmo democrático de su juventud. Había terminado por aceptarlo todo, aunque lo que no podía tragar era la idea de que le jugaran una mala pasada a Hyacinth; hasta había llegado a interesarse por la política, sobre la que siempre había tenido la opinión —opinión ahora muy enraizada en los Poupin— de que era un invento hecho a propósito para echar tierra a los ojos de los reformistas desinteresados y para soslayar la solución del problema social. Él había renunciado a solucionarlo; no se veía forma de aclararlo que no diera la impresión de ir a armar un lío mucho mayor que el que ya había, y que, cuando se alcanzaban los sesenta y cinco años, dejaba en buena parte de irritarle a uno. Mister Vetch sentía aún cierta acritud cuando se

trataba del Libro de Oraciones y de los obispos, y si en algunos momentos estaba un poco avergonzado de haber aceptado el mundo presente, eso no le impedía pensar que seguía repudiando cualquier otro. Sin embargo, la idea de los grandes cambios había figurado entre los sueños de su juventud; ¿qué clase de cambio era posible en las relaciones de hombres y mujeres sino una nueva combinación de esos elementos? Si podían cambiarse los elementos, la cosa valdría la pena; pero no sólo era imposible introducir otros nuevos, ni siquiera se había descubierto todavía la manera de librarse de los viejos. Las piezas del tablero de ajedrez seguían siendo las pasiones, las envidias, las supersticiones y las estupideces del hombre, y la posición que ocuparan en un momento dado con respecto a las demás sólo podía interesar a los hados invisibles y crueles que jugaban la partida, y que desde hacía siglos estaban allí sentados, con la espalda encorvada. El cansancio se había ido apoderando del violinista a medida que aumentaban el diámetro de su cintura y el montoncito de medias coronas y soberanos acumulados en una caja de hojalata, que tenía cerrada con candado y metida debajo de la cama, y a medida que se sentía cada vez más unido a la modista y a su hijo adoptivo por los lazos del sentimiento y la costumbre. Si había dejado de insistir en las demandas que creía tenía derecho a hacerle a la sociedad, como lo hacía en los tiempos en que su conversación escandalizaba a Pinnie, no quería tampoco insistir sobre Hyacinth; pensaba que, aunque los poderes constituidos debieran «contar» con él, sería de mejor gusto no ser inoportuno. Lo que le daba miedo del interesante mozo era que por malas influencias pudiera meterse en honduras que además de deplorables no dejaran de ser ridículas. Puede incluso decirse que mister Vetch tenía el secreto designio de interceder en favor suyo.

Lady Aurora apareció en la habitación, muy silenciosamente, media hora después de que Hyacinth saliera de ella, y le dijo al violinista que tenía que acudir a otros deberes, pero que la enfermera ya había vuelto y el médico había prometido pasar por allí a las cinco. Ella volvería al atardecer, y Hyacinth estaba entretanto con su tía, que le había reconocido sin ninguna protesta; parecía realmente feliz de tenerle otra vez junto a ella, y estaba con los ojos cerrados, muy débil y sin hablar, agarrando con su mano la del chico. La inquietud se le había pasado y tenía menos fiebre, pero estaba sin fuerzas para hablar, y *lady* Aurora no disimulaba que todo hacía suponer que se agotaba rápidamente. Mister Vetch ya lo había aceptado y, después de que su señoría le dejara, encendió otra pipa filosófica, y se dedicó a esperar a que llegase el médico en el saloncito abandonado de la modista, al que se había permitido en otros tiempos hacer tantas visitas y donde se había tomado tantos vasitos de coñac caliente. El eco de sus pequeñas sorpresas y de sus contradicciones sin motivo, su asombro boquiabierto ante las paradojas, parecían todavía flotar en el aire; pero el lugar se sentía como desamparado y de duelo, como si ella estuviese ya enterrada.

Pinnie siempre había tenido una mano maravillosa para «quitar cosas de en medio»; los restos que su trabajo dejaba como testimonio eran a veces muy grandes, pero la reacción en favor de una alfombra sin un solo hilo era todavía mayor; y en aquella ocasión, antes de meterse en la cama, aún había encontrado fuerzas para barrerlo y ponerlo todo en orden, como si estuviera segura de que la habitación no volvería a recibir sus cuidados. Hasta para el viejo violinista, que no tenía la sensibilidad de Hyacinth para el escenario de la vida, la habitación tenía ya el frío de un sitio arreglado para el entierro. Después de que el médico visitara a Pinnie aquella tarde, no quedaban ya dudas de que no se tardaría en hacerse allí muy tristes preparativos.

Sin embargo, *miss* Pynsent soportó su enfermedad casi quince días más, durante los cuales Hyacinth estuvo constantemente en su cuarto. No volvió al taller de Crook, con el que sus relaciones parecían interrumpidas por tiempo indefinido; en realidad, mientras Pinnie necesitó sus cuidados, no salió más de dos veces de Lomax Place como no fuera por pocos minutos. Una de esas veces fue a Audley Court y pasó allí una hora; la otra se reunió con Millicent Henning, después de haber convenido con ella dar un paseo por los muelles. Intentó encontrar un rato para ir a dar las gracias a *madame* Poupin, que le había ofrecido muchas veces preparar una *tisane* según una receta que la pareja de Lisson Grove consideraba insuperable, aunque la vecindad no la apreciara demasiado; pero se vio obligado a mostrar su agradecimiento con una carta respetuosa, que compuso no sin cierto trabajo, pero con muy buen ánimo, en lengua francesa, que en su opinión resultaba especialmente apropiada para cortesías de ese género. *Lady* Aurora fue una y otra vez a la casa ensombrecida, donde dispensó su benéfica influencia velando a la enferma, aportando las ideas sanitarias más modernas, y por medio de sus conversaciones con Hyacinth, dirigidas con mucho más ingenio de lo que pudiera esperarse de su confusión, y encaminadas a distraerle. Preparó también muchas veces el té (hubo un gran consumo de ese líquido durante la enfermedad de Pinnie), y por un procedimiento mucho más avanzado que el que solía emplearse en Pentonville. Fue portadora de varios mensajes y de buen número de consejos médicos de Rose Muniment, cuyo interés en el caso de la modista ponía de mal humor a Hyacinth por la valentía que mostraba, y que aun siendo de segunda mano resultaba extravagante:

daba la impresión de estar tan resignada a los males de los demás como a los suyos propios.

Al día siguiente de haber vuelto de Medley, a Hyacinth le había entrado un tremendo deseo de hacer algo especial en favor de Pinnie. Tenía la penosa sensación de que se estaba muriendo a causa de su pobre vida, del remordimiento nunca borrado de haberle hecho una mala pasada cuando era pequeño —como si no se lo hubiera perdonado desde hacía mucho tiempo y no pensara que era la más sabia decisión que podía haber tomado—, de alguna bajeza en su actitud que le era imposible evitar. Quería hacer algo que le convenciera de que tenía de la enferma la mejor opinión que pudiera tenerse: por eso insistió en que el señor Buffery celebrara una consulta con un doctor del West End suponiendo que el doctor del West End consintiera en reunirse con el señor Buffery. Gracias a la intervención de *lady* Aurora pudo descubrirse a un oráculo que no era enemigo de tal concesión, y que ella no había llevado ya porque dudaba por un lado ante la idea de imponer un gasto tan grande a la débil economía de Lomax Place, y por otro no se atrevía a afrontarlo ella, ya que sus fondos andaban mermados por las muchas caridades que hacía; y en previsión de la cuenta del gran hombre, Hyacinth, como en otras ocasiones, había acudido por un préstamo a mister Vetch. El gran hombre llegó y estuvo muy deferente con el señor Buffery, cuya actuación estimó acertada; permaneció varios minutos en la casa, mirando a Hyacinth por encima de las gafas —parecía casi más interesado en él que en la enferma— e hizo salir a casi todo el Place a contemplar su coche de caballos. Al final se negó a aceptar cualquier clase de honorarios, cosa que desilusionó y molestó a Hyacinth, que veía estropeado todo el efecto de la fineza que quería hacerle a Pinnie; aunque cuando se lo dijo a mister Vetch, el cáustico violinista acogió el comentario con una cara tan divertida que, habida cuenta de la situación, rayaba en lo inverosímil.

Hyacinth, en todo caso, había hecho cuanto podía, y el elegante doctor había dado algunas instrucciones que anunciaban que habría que acudir a una farmacia muy cara de Bond Street, perspectiva que al joven le proporcionó cierto consuelo. La salud de la pobre Pinnie declinaba a pesar de todo sin remedio, y una tarde en que estaba solo con ella, algo más de una semana después de volver de Medley, tuvo la impresión de que ya no estaba consciente. La respetable enfermera se había ido a cenar, y un olorcillo a *bacon* frito subía por la escalera, como indicando que en la zona de abajo las cosas iban mucho mejor. Hyacinth no acababa de comprender si Pinnie estaba dormida o despierta; creía que no estaba inconsciente, pero desde hacía una hora no daba señales de vida. Por fin movió la mano, como si se diera cuenta de que él estaba allí y quisiera tocarle, y murmuró:

—¿Por qué vino? Yo no quiero verla.

En seguida comprendió a quién se refería: su recuerdo había vuelto a través de los años a aquel día espantoso —le había descrito todos los pormenores— en el que *mistress* Bowerbank había invadido su pacífica vida y había sobresaltado su conciencia con un mensaje enviado de la cárcel.

—Sentóse allí, y estuvo mucho tiempo, mucho tiempo. Era enorme y yo estaba asustada. Ella gemía y gemía, y lloraba… era demasiado horrible. No pude evitarlo, no pude evitarlo.

Su mente vagaba de la figura de *mistress* Bowerbank, sentada como en un trono en el sofá amarillo del saloncito trastornado, a la trágica mujer de Milbank, cuyos lamentos tenía todavía en los oídos; y mezclada con esa visión confusa aparecía aún la pesadilla de que podía haber obrado de otra manera. En lo concerniente a Hyacinth, todo eso había quedado aclarado, pero Pinnie conservaba más viva que ninguna otra cosa en aquellos momentos su obsesión por el arrepentimiento y la expiación. A él le ponía malo que creyera que esas cosas eran aún necesarias, y se inclinaba sobre ella y le decía todo lo que se le ocurría para calmarla. Le dijo que dejara de pensar en aquella hora tan triste y tan lejana, que hacía mucho tiempo había terminado de tener consecuencias para ellos; que pensara sólo en el futuro, cuando volviera a sentirse fuerte, que él la atendería, que estaría siempre con ella, y que la cuidaría mucho mejor que como lo había hecho antes. Había pensado en muchas cosas mientras estaba allí sentado mirando las sombras que proyectaba la lámpara de noche —sombras altas e imponentes de cosas pequeñas y que no valían nada— y entre otras cosas había dejado volar la imaginación sobre las consecuencias que se habrían derivado para él de no haber sido adoptado siendo niño por la modista: el asilo, la calle, ignorancia, frío, suciedad, harapos, y noches encogido debajo de un puente o en el quicio de una puerta, piojos, hambre y golpes, y quizá hasta el brote de una inclinación heredada hacia el crimen; todas esas cosas, que veía con mayor viveza que nunca, le parecían ser las que le habrían correspondido. Intimidades con una princesa, visitas a viejas y hermosas casas de campo, y hasta la facultad de poder pensar en la mejor manera de dar un escarmiento a las clases privilegiadas habrían quedado en ese caso fuera de su alcance; y el que Pinnie le hubiera rescatado de padecer ese destino y le hubiera proporcionado todos esos lujos representaba casi que le había dado una gran posición en lugar de otra horrible, sólo con que tuviera la magnanimidad de creerlo así.

Tenía los ojos abiertos y fijos en él, pero el vivo destello que la modista solía dirigir a Lomax Place,

cuando estaba dándole a la aguja sentada junto a la ventana, había desaparecido completamente de ellos.

—Allí no, ¿qué iba a hacer yo allí? —preguntó en voz baja—. Con los grandes no, los grandes.

—¿Los grandes qué? ¿Qué quieres decir?

—Ya lo sabes, ya lo sabes —dijo haciendo otro esfuerzo—. ¿No has estado con ellos? ¿No te han recibido?

—No van a separarnos, Pinnie; no van a interponerse así entre nosotros —dijo Hyacinth, y cayó de rodillas al lado de la cama.

—Tienes que separarte, eso me hace feliz. Sabía que te encontrarían por fin.

—Pobre Pinnie, pobre Pinnie —murmuró.

—Era sólo por eso… Ya me voy.

—Si te quedas conmigo no tendrás nada que temer —sonrió Hyacinth.

—¿Y qué dirían *ellos*?

—Prefiero estar contigo —insistió él.

—A mí me has tenido siempre. Ahora les toca a ellos: ya han esperado.

—¡Sí, la verdad es que han esperado! —dijo Hyacinth.

—Pero lo arreglarán, lo arreglarán todo —jadeó la pobre mujer—. ¡No pude, no pude evitarlo!

Esas palabras fueron el último hilillo de fuerza que le quedaba. No volvió a dar más señales de vida, y cuatro días más tarde dejaba de respirar. Hyacinth y *lady* Aurora estaban con ella, pero ninguno de los dos pudo darse cuenta de en qué momento había muerto.

Hyacinth y mister Vetch llevaron el féretro, con la ayuda de Eustache Poupin y de Paul Muniment. *Lady* Aurora y *madame* Poupin asistieron al funeral, lo mismo que una veintena de vecinos de Lomax Place; pero entre todos los componentes del duelo, el miembro más distinguido, al menos en apariencia, era Millicent Henning, que llamó la atención por su belleza, seria pero brillante, por su perfecto comportamiento y por el buen gusto y estilo de su traje negro. Mister Vetch tenía formada su idea; había estado acariciándola desde que Hyacinth volvió de Medley, y tres días después de haber enterrado a Pinnie se la presentó a Hyacinth. El entierro había sido el viernes, y Hyacinth había dicho que el lunes por la mañana volvería al taller de Crook. Era un domingo por la noche y había salido a dar un paseo, pero no con Millicent Henning ni con Paul Muniment, sino solo, como en sus viejos tiempos. Al volver se encontró al violinista, que estaba esperándole y despabilando una vela de sebo en el saloncito en penumbra. Tenía en la mano dos o tres papelitos en los que se veían algunas notas de su lápiz, y Hyacinth adivinó, si no toda la verdad, sí que había venido para hablar de negocios. Pinnie había dejado un testamento, del que había nombrado albacea a su viejo amigo. Mister Vetch le informó del propósito de aquel documento tan sencillo y sensato, y le dijo que había estado mirando las «pertenencias» de la modista. Las pertenencias de la pobre Pinnie se componían de los muebles de la casa de Lomax Place, la obligación de pagar una cuarta parte de la renta y una suma de dinero en la Caja de Ahorros. Hyacinth se extrañó de oír que las economías de Pinnie hubieran podido dar fruto en los últimos tiempos (las cosas le habían ido muy mal y el dinero había faltado muchas veces en la casa) hasta que mister Vetch le explicó que él mismo había vigilado el pequeño tesoro acumulado durante la época de relativa prosperidad, decidido a que no se tocara como no fuera en caso de extrema necesidad. Aunque había poco trabajo, todavía podía hacerlo cuando lo tenía, y el dinero debía guardarse por si llegaba el momento en que quedara inútil. Por suerte no había vivido para ver ese día, y la suma depositada en el banco había durado más que ella, aunque reducida a menos de la mitad. No había dejado ninguna deuda, salvo la de la casa y algunas otras de su enfermedad. El violinista ya sabía —se apresuró a darle a *mi* amigo esa seguridad— que si Pinnie se hubiera puesto enferma habría podido contar con él de vieja lo mismo que él había contado con ella de niño. Pero ¿qué habría pasado si Hyacinth hubiese tenido un accidente? ¿Qué ocurriría si sufría alguna condena por sus andanzas revolucionarias que, por poco peligrosas que fueran para la sociedad, en un país en el que la autoridad, aunque bondadosa, gustaba hacer de cuando en cuando un escarmiento, podía meterle tras los muros de la cárcel? Para bien o para mal, a fuerza de pellizcar y arañar de un lado y otro, había ahorrado un poco y, después de pagarlo todo, aún quedaría una fracción de ese poco. Todo se lo dejaba a Hyacinth, todo salvo un par de candelabros plateados y el viejo *chiffonnier* que tan bonito había sido en su día; Pinnie rogaba a mister Vetch que aceptara esas dos cosas en reconocimiento a sus impagables servicios. Los muebles, y todo lo que no necesitara para su propio uso, podía venderlos, y pagar algunas deudas con lo que sacara de ellos. El dinero quedaría para él; eran unas treinta y siete libras. Al dar esa cantidad, mister Vetch parecía entender que Hyacinth iba a ser dueño de una fortunita muy apreciable. Hasta para el mismo chico, a pesar de sus recientes iniciaciones, semejante lotería no parecía nada despreciable; representaba la inesperada posibilidad de no tener que volver todavía al taller de Crook. La representaba hasta que se acordó de los

anticipos que le había hecho el violinista, y hasta darse cuenta de que cuando los hubiera pagado apenas quedarían veinte libras. Claro que, a pesar de todo, esa suma era mucho mayor de la que antes había tenido en el bolsillo. Dio las gracias al viejo por su información y comentó —sin ninguna hipocresía— que sentía que Pinnie no hubiera podido disfrutar en vida de esa suma. El albacea respondió que le había dado un interés mucho mayor que el de cualquier otra inversión, pues estaba convencido de que creía que no viviría para disfrutarlo, y que esa fe le había recompensado con los cuadros y visiones que tenía del momento en que su niño pudiera hacer algo grande.

—¿Qué entendía ella por eso… qué quiere usted decir? —preguntó Hyacinth.

Y nada más decirlo pensó que ya sabía lo que iba a decir el viejo, sería alguna referencia a la esperanza de Pinnie de que fuera a reunirse con sus «parientes» y a las facilidades que le proporcionarían treinta libras para hacer un buen papel entre ellos; y en un momento mister Vetch le miró como si fuera esa respuesta la que tenía en los labios, pero al cabo de un segundo respondió de manera muy distinta.

—Ella tenía la esperanza de que te marcharas y vieras mundo. —El violinista le miró y luego dijo—: Tenía un deseo especial de que fueras a París.

Hyacinth había palidecido con la noticia, y de momento no dijo nada; luego exclamó, casi con un quejido:

—¡Ay, París!

—A ella le hubiera gustado que hasta pudieras darte una vuelta por Italia.

—¡Hombre, eso habría sido estupendo! Pero también hay límites para lo que uno puede hacer con veinte libras.

—¿Cómo con veinte libras? —preguntó el viejo levantando las cejas, mientras las arrugas de su frente formaban profundas sombras a la luz de la vela.

—Eso será más o menos lo que haya después de haber saldado mi cuenta con usted.

—¿Qué estás diciendo de tu cuenta conmigo? No pienso aceptar ni un céntimo de tu dinero.

Los ojos de Hyacinth se pasearon por la elocuente pobreza del traje de su interlocutor.

—No quiero que parezca que soy un animal, pero imagínese que es usted el que pierde sus facultades.

—Hijo mío, me quedaría uno de los recursos de que disponía Pinnie. Acudiría a ti para que fueras el sostén de mi vejez.

—Puede hacerlo con toda seguridad, salvo en el caso de uno de esos peligros que acaba de mencionar… que me metan en la cárcel o me cuelguen.

—Sí, y precisamente porque pienso que el peligro será mucho menor si te marchas, es por lo que te animo a aprovechar esta oportunidad. Verás el mundo y te gustará más entonces. Pensarás que la sociedad, aun tal y como está, tiene cosas buenas.

—Nunca me ha gustado tanto como durante estos últimos *meses*.

—¡Ah, sí! ¡Pues espera a ver París!

—¡París, París! —repitió Hyacinth como en un sueño.

Y se quedó mirando la llama vacilante de la vela, como si viera en ella las más maravillosas escenas: actitud, acento y expresión que el violinista interpretó como la vibración de una cuerda hereditaria y latente, y como un síntoma de un agudo sentido de la oportunidad.

Libro IV

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El bulevar estaba animadísimo, brillante con las iluminaciones, la variedad y alegría de la gente, los cafés abiertos y las tiendas deslumbrantes con sus inmensos escaparates, los vestíbulos encendidos de los teatros, las luces de los carruajes, el alboroto de alegría y prosperidad, el difuso murmullo de las conversaciones y toda la magnificencia de un atardecer de junio en París. Hyacinth había estado andando horas y horas —en los siete días que llevaba en París no había parado de andar de la mañana a la noche— y sentía un gran cansancio, una tremenda dejadez, que no carecía de encanto por la plenitud que significaba, en el momento de sentarse a una mesa enfrente de Tortoni, y no tanto para descansar como para disfrutarlo. Había visto tantas cosas, había sentido, aprendido, vibrado, reído y palpitado tanto durante aquellos días, que veía por fin el peligro de llegar a armarse un lío y comprendía la necesidad de hacer balance.

Esa noche se había detenido en seco; estaba sentado a la puerta del café más *dandy* de París, y recapitulaba sus impresiones. Había intentado entrar en el teatro de las Variedades, que brillaba al otro lado de la avenida, entre las luces de la calle y el follaje claro de los árboles, poco favorecidos por el asfalto. Pero la impresión de Chaumont… eso lo dejaba por el momento; era un aliciente más de la situación pensar que disponía todavía de mucho tiempo para ver el *succès du jour*. Su decisión de pedir una *marquise* le produjo el mismo efecto cuando el camarero, cuya soberbia pechera y patillas emergían del cilindro de un delantal blanco, acudió a servirle. Sabía que el brebaje era caro, se había enterado en el momento en que por primera vez lo había oído nombrar, que había sido la noche antes, mientras estaba sentado en su butaca durante un *entr'acte* de la Comédie Française. Un señor que estaba a su lado, un hombre joven vestido con traje de etiqueta, hablaba con un conocido de la fila de atrás y le recomendaba refrescarse con esa delicia al salir del teatro: no había nada como eso para tomarlo al aire libre en una noche de calor. El camarero le trajo un vaso alto de champaña en el que había un trozo de hielo, y el chico pensó que no había esperado una cosa menos sensacional al buscar una mesa libre en la terraza de Tortoni. Había muy pocas mesas vacías, y él creía que las otras estaban ocupadas por grandes celebridades; en cualquier caso, eran los tipos que había esperado y querido encontrar cuando la oportunidad de marchar fuera con los bolsillos llenos (era aún más extraordinaria que su encuentro con la princesa) se le había hecho realidad en Lomax Place. Conocía Tortoni por las novelas francesas, y al estar allí sentado tenía la vaga sensación de estar fraternizando con Balzac y con Alfred de Musset: quedaban en el aire ecos y recuerdos de sus obras perdidas entre exhalaciones indefinidas, la extraña mezcla de olores, en parte agradables y en parte impuros, del bulevar. «Espléndido París, encantador París», ese estribillo fragmento de una invocación, principio sin fin, eran las únicas palabras articuladas que se le habían metido en el himno de alabanza que su imaginación había estado dirigiendo a la capital de Francia desde el mismo momento de su llegada. Reconocía y saludaba entre palpitaciones el lugar de sus antepasados maternos, y se sentía orgulloso de estar unido a tantas pruebas de una civilización que no parecía tener tacha. Tenía momentos de perplejidad, y hasta llegaba a sentir repugnancia cuando se le ocurría pensar que la ciudad más fabulosa del mundo era también la más sangrienta; pero predominaba la sensación de entender y de sentirse atraído, y ese entendimiento le daba alas, parecía transportarle a campos de conocimiento más amplios, a sensaciones aún más elevadas.

En otros tiempos, en Londres, había pensado una y otra vez en su abuelo, el relojero revolucionario que había conocido el éxtasis de las barricadas y lo había pagado con la vida, y sus sueños apenas se habían resentido del hecho de no saber casi nada de él. Le daba forma en su imaginación a ese mítico antepasado, y estaba convencido que era tan bajo como él, tenía el pelo rizado, un gran talento para hacer su trabajo y una extraordinaria elocuencia natural, junto a muchas de las más atractivas cualidades del carácter francés. Pero era también temerario y un poco chiflado, y probablemente un fresco; tenía líos y deudas y unas pasiones irrefrenables; su vida había sido una pura fiebre, y su trágico fin la consecuencia más natural de

ella. De todos modos, hubiera sido maravilloso oírle hablar, sentir el influjo de una alegría que ni la locura política podía apagar; porque su nieto tenía la teoría de que hablaba un francés antiguo, delicioso y atractivo en su expresión y acento, y libre de la bajeza de la jerga moderna. Ese personaje, nebuloso pero vivo al mismo tiempo, se transformó en el compañero de Hyacinth desde el día de su llegada; iba de un lado para otro con el hijo de Florentine, se sentaba a cenar con él en la mesa del restaurante, se acababa con él la botella, y hacía subir la cuenta, además de darle consejos y revelarle un sinfín de descubrimientos. Conocía el secreto del joven sin que se lo dijera y parecía mirarle desde el diminuto mantelillo en que estaba el gran trozo de pan, un poquito apartado para dejar sitio a los codos… A Hyacinth le sorprendía que el pueblo de París hubiera podido sentir alguna vez la furia del hambre, teniendo unas barras de pan tan enormes; le miraba con ojos brillantes de profunda comprensión, y con labios que parecían decirle que cuando uno iba a morir al día siguiente debía comer y beber y halagar sus pobres sentidos todo lo que pudiera. En esa presencia impalpable y edificante no había nada venerable, nada que impusiera o pareciera desaprobar; el joven consideraba que Hyacinthe Vivier era un hombre de su tiempo, que podía comprender perfectamente todas sus alegrías y sus penas. Se había preguntado muchas veces dónde habría estado la barricada en que cayó su abuelo, y por fin quedó satisfecho al llegar a la conclusión —es imposible saber a través de qué deducciones— de que se había alzado en la rue Saint-Honoré, muy cerca de la iglesia de Saint-Roch. Los dos habían recorrido juntos todos los museos y jardines, y las principales iglesias —el mártir republicano era fácilmente conformable en ese punto—; habían paseado por las callejas y soportales, por las grandes avenidas y, sobre todo, una y otra vez, por la orilla del río, donde los muelles eran una diversión inagotable para Hyacinth, que se paraba media hora ante los puestos de los libreros de viejo y se llenaba los bolsicos de volúmenes de cinco peniques, mientras las industrias del Sena brillaban allá abajo y al otro lado del Louvre se extendía glorioso a lo largo de una legua. Hyacinth disfrutó tanto del Louvre como si le hubieran invitado a ir allí, igual que le habían invitado al pobre y ya olvidado Medley; los primeros días anduvo rondando el museo, no se cansaba de mirar algunos cuadros y de contemplar el brillo de los suelos, en los que se reflejaban los frescos del techo. París entero le parecía sumamente artístico y decorativo; tenía la sensación de haber vivido hasta entonces en un mundo oscuro, sucio y filisteo, un mundo donde predominaba el gusto de Little Peddlington y donde la distribución artística nunca se había tenido en cuenta. En la ciudad de sus antepasados ese sentido artístico había estado presente desde el principio, y por eso su sensibilidad respondía en seguida, y volvía a repetir el estribillo siempre que la belleza de los monumentos le sorprendía bajo la luz plateada o cuando los veía aparecer al final de alguna soberbia perspectiva entre tonos azulados de una gran delicadeza. Le daba la impresión de que la ciudad se expresaba por sí misma, y que lo hacía en gran estilo, mientras que Londres resultaba vago, borroso, mudo y sin relieve. ¡Espléndido París, encantador París, en verdad!

Eustache Poupin le había dado cartas para tres o cuatro amigos demócratas, devotos ardientes de la cuestión social que habían escapado por milagro a la crueldad del exilio o sufrido la vergüenza del perdón y que, a pesar de los *mouchards* republicanos, no menos infames que los imperiales, y de las redadas periódicas de un despotismo que sólo había cambiado los botones y los sellos, conservaban viva la chispa sagrada que algún día se transformaría en llama abrasadora. Pero Hyacinth no había pensado en entregar esas cartas de presentación; las había aceptado por el alborozo y la solemnidad que Poupin había puesto al escribirlas, y porque no se atrevía a decir a la pareja de Lisson Grove que desde aquella horrible noche en casa de Hoffendahl sus sueños habían cambiado mucho. No le había servido para concentrarse, sino para relajarse, y tenía poco sentido que se dedicara a buscar a los amigos de Poupin —uno de ellos vivía en Batignolles y los otros en el faubourg Saint-Antoine— para hacerles creer que se preocupaba por lo que se preocupaban ellos y en la forma en que ellos lo hacían. Lo que realmente le ocupaba en ese momento no era la idea de cómo debía destruirse la sociedad, sino el sentido de las maravillosas cosas que había producido, la fábrica de belleza y poder que había levantado. Que estaba destinada a ser destruida era algo evidente que él conocía y los otros también; pero desde que esa verdad se había alzado ante él en toda su magnitud, comprendía que se había producido un traslado, al menos parcial, de sus simpatías; el mismo cambio de que había dado síntomas al decirle a la princesa que a quien compadecía era a los ricos, a los que pasaban por felices. A medida que transcurría la noche, mientras seguía sentado en Tortoni, la última emoción que iba a visitarle sería el arrepentimiento por no haberse puesto en contacto con los pobres amigos de Poupin, por no haberse molestado en conocer a gente que tomaba las cosas en serio.

Claro que después de todo, ¿quién lo tomaba más en serio que él o quién había dado más pruebas aunque fueran secretas de hacerlo? El sentimiento con que había aceptado los avances de mister Vetch, la idea de que si estaba destinado a morir en la flor de la edad tenía derecho de hacer una escapada a ese mundo hermoso y horrible, no le había abandonado. Esa idea era muy natural, pero lo que resultaba

extraño era lo que había empujado al violinista, su deseo de hacer algo que le gustara, de engatusarle y mandarle fuera. Y lo más raro era que mister Vetch no parecía tomar en consideración que el chico aquel año ya se había divertido como no podían hacerlo los artesanos de Londres. Ésa fue una de las muchas cosas en que pensó Hyacinth; pensó en otras que venían a cuento y en otras que no venían a cuento; era casi la primera vez que se sentaba con la tranquilidad suficiente para ponerse a pensar. Un centenar de reverberaciones confusas del pasado reciente se le agolpaban en la cabeza y veía que había vivido más en los seis meses anteriores que durante el resto de su vida. La sucesión de acontecimientos acabó por estirarse y él recreó los momentos más raros, más inesperados. Sobre todo su última semana en Medley se había transformado en una fábula lejana, en el eco de una canción. Podía leerla entera como una novela encuadernada en pergamino y oro, contemplarla como hubiera contemplado algún precioso cuadro. Su visita a Medley había sido perfecta hasta el fin, y ni siquiera los tres días comprometidos por la presencia de Sholto habían roto el encanto, porque los otros tres que pasaron antes de su marcha —cuando la propia princesa le había indicado que se fuera— resultaron los más importantes de todos. Fue entonces cuando le hizo ver con claridad que lo tomaba en serio, que estaba dispuesta para cualquier sacrificio. Comprendía que ella era su término de comparación, su autoridad, su medida, su perpetua referencia; y al tomar posesión de su mente la había renovado por completo. Era un término nuevo y, estando en un país extranjero, veía lo mucho que su conversación, tan extranjera ella misma, le había preparado para entenderlo. En París vio por supuesto muchísimas mujeres y se fijó en casi todas ellas, sobre todo en las actrices, comparando sus movimientos, su manera de hablar y de vestir con los de su extraordinaria amiga. La encontraba muy por encima de ellas en todos los aspectos, aunque una o dos de las actrices parecían imitarla.

El recuerdo de los últimos días que había pasado con ella le emocionaba como el roce de una mejilla mojada por las lágrimas. En sus últimos momentos de intimidad, en la más extraordinaria y rica de las revelaciones, había llorado por él, y sospechaba que tenía la secreta intención de impedir que cumpliera el juramento que había hecho a Hoffendahl, a todo lo que Hoffendahl representaba. Pretendía que lo aceptaba, y decía únicamente que cuando hubiera hecho la parte que le correspondía, ella se esforzaría en salvarle, en cubrirle con una nube como la diosa madre del héroe de Troya solía hacer en el poema de Virgilio para *escamotear* a Eneas. Pero él tenía la impresión de que lo que realmente se proponía era no dejarle hacer nada. Lo tomaba en serio para ella, pero no para él. El principal resultado de su intimidad con ella, en la que, sin rebajarse, había conseguido elevarle más y más hasta alcanzar el punto más alto, había sido hacerle creer que era lo bastante bueno para cualquier cosa. Al preguntarle el último día si le podía escribir, contestó que sí después de dos o tres semanas. Le había escrito para comunicar la muerte de Pinnie y otra vez en el momento de marcharse, y al hacerlo había tenido en cuenta otra de las cosas que le había dicho: que no empleara frases vagas ni hiciera protestas o cumplidos; quería saber lo que hacía, los detalles más pequeños, personales e íntimos de su vida. Por eso le comunicó el desmantelamiento de Lomax Place incluida la venta del mobiliario renqueante, y otros pormenores igualmente sórdidos. Le había dicho lo que sacó de la transacción, una mísera cantidad pero suficiente para pagar algunas deudas, y le había informado también de que una de las maneras empleadas por mister Vetch para despacharle a toda prisa hacia París había sido incitarle a coger treinta libras de las que tenía ahorradas, completando así la suma heredada de Pinnie, que en forma que ninguno de los amigos de Hyacinth podía considerar frugal o siquiera respetable, dedicaba a una mera excursión. Confesó que había terminado por aceptar las treinta libras, añadiendo que temía que su especial situación —ella sabría lo que quería decir— le empujara a uno a mostrar falta de dignidad: le dispusiera a echar mano de lo que pudiera caer, o cuando menos le hiciera muy tolerante ante los caprichos que tomaban la forma de alivio voluntario.

Lo que no le dijo a su deslumbrante amiga fue cómo le habían recibido Paul Muniment y Millicent Henning al volver de Medley. El recibimiento de Millicent había sido de lo más extraño, sorprendentemente amable. No le había hecho ninguna escena y parecía haber abandonado la línea de recriminarle cuando se quejaba de sus equívocas andanzas. Le trató como si estuviera encantada de verle metido entre los encopetados; como apreciaba tanto el éxito, iba a tratarle con mayor ternura al verle triunfante. Intentó hacerle contar el estilo de vida que se llevaba en una casa donde le invitaban a uno a estar allí por las buenas y sin tener que pagar; y le sorprendió, casi tanto como le agradó, ver que no soltaba sus acostumbradas indirectas contra la princesa. Fue pródiga en exclamaciones al contestar él a algunas de sus preguntas, exclamaciones que olían a Pimlico, «¡Pero bueno!» y «¡Cielos!» y le molestó más que nunca con su detestable costumbre de decir «Pues claro, ésa es la cuestión», siempre que él decía algo a lo que quería asentir de buena gana y con talento. Pero no se burló del carácter de la princesa; contuvo la sátira cuando tenía la puerta abierta para hacerlo. Hyacinth pensó que había sido una suerte para ella: no hubiera podido

soportarlo (nervioso y angustiado como estaba por causa de Pinnie) si en momentos como aquellos hubiera tenido el mal gusto de ser grosera o descarada. Bajo la tensión que sufría, le habría molestado demasiado y habría roto completamente con ella. Ya le ponía de bastante mal humor con las vulgaridades que decía. Dos o tres cosas muy corrientes que repetía con frecuencia la degradaban ante sus ojos mucho más de lo que podía esperarse, como cuando decía «relleno» por lleno o «liquidado» por vendido, o cuando comentaba que suponía que iba a «darle la patada» a su trabajo en el taller de Crook. Era lo mismo que pedirle que hablara *mejor* que una señora elegante. Esas frases, por otra parte, le habían herido antes los oídos cientos de veces, pero después le resultaban tan insoportables como para armar una bronca a causa de ellas. Y no es que tuviera ganas de hacerlo, pues de haber llevado la cosa adelante habría tenido que reconocer que su intimidad con la princesa le privaba de todo derecho sobre Millicent. Por otra parte, Millicent se mostraba discretísima; estaba claro que quería darle a entender que lo mejor para los dos era respetar la libertad de cada cual. Lo que deseaba la señorita Henning era un acuerdo amistoso, y Hyacinth tampoco se aventuraba a preguntar qué era lo que se proponía hacer con su libertad. Durante el mes transcurrido entre la muerte de Pinnie y su visita a París la había visto varias veces, porque la decisión de respetar la voluntad de cada cual no significaba que dejaran de verse, y además era natural que ella estuviera muy cariñosa en aquel mal momento. Hyacinth había sentido mucho la muerte de Pinnie, y Millicent era lo bastante lista para comprenderlo, por eso le trataba con más cariño que nunca. Le hablaba casi como si fuera su madre y él un niño convaleciente; le decía que era su ojo derecho, le llamaba pillín y amigo verdadero y predilecto; se dedicaba a sermonearle y se abstenía de beber cerveza (hasta que supo que había heredado una fortuna), y una vez que Hyacinth comentó (pasándose también un poco) que cuando se muere una persona querida nos persigue el recuerdo de las veces que fuimos poco cariñosos o bondadosos con ella, respondió con tanta dignidad, que sus palabras fueron casi una contribución al punto de vista filosófico: «Pues claro, ésa es la cuestión».

Al ver su comportamiento durante aquella temporada, Hyacinth bahía llegado a pensar si llevaría en la cara alguna señal de hombre predestinado, algo que traicionara el compromiso en que le había puesto Diedrich Hoffendahl; empezó a temer que estuviese otra vez en marcha aquel «repugnante enternecimiento» que había observado desde hacía mucho tiempo entre la gente favorecida por las indiscreciones de Pinnie. La compasión que Millicent sentía por él nunca había sido una de las razones de quererla; por suerte, había podido contrarrestarla al tener la virtud de ponerla furiosa. Aquella noche, sentado en el bulevar y viendo pasar la interminable sucesión de caras, una de las cosas que pensó fue lo raro que era que le gustara todavía; porque bien sabía Dios que le gustaba muchísimo más la princesa y hasta entonces había creído siempre que cuando un sentimiento de esa naturaleza era tan fuerte que llegaba a poseerle a uno, barría todas las otras predilecciones menores. Pero estaba bien claro que seguía existiendo para él como una realidad femenina de amplio aliento, que en modo alguno podía pensarse que estaba cansado de ella ni ella de él y que, a pesar de tener tantas otras cosas que admirar, recordar su robusta belleza y sus sentimientos primitivos seguía siendo algo muy grato. Hyacinth se acordaba de ella lo mismo que un bárbaro joven y listo que peregrinara a Roma se habría acordado de la amante dacia o ibérica que esperaba su vuelta en las costas de alguna provincia aún sin civilizar. Si Millicent consideraba que su visita a una «mansión» campestre era una prueba del éxito que le esperaba —cómo conciliaba esa idea con la sospecha de que veía, como una corona entretejida entre sus bucles, la luz de su espeluznante destino, la aureola del martirio, le habría sido muy difícil de explicar—, si a la vuelta de Medley la señorita Henning consideraba que había pasado a ocupar su puesto en el lado de los vencedores, era muy natural que le pareciera muy bien que Hyacinth emprendiera el viaje; y la verdad es que llegado el momento hablaba de su participación en ese privilegio de las clases elevadas como si fuera ella quien lo había inventado y hasta hubiera sido quien había aportado los fondos necesarios. Según ella decía sólo podía gustarle la gente que tenía clase, y Hyacinth jamas había tenido tanta clase como al marcharse al extranjero con una sombrerera como el mister Vetch de antaño. Podía pensar sin amargura que Millicent aprovecharía su ausencia para mejorar sus relaciones con Sholto; sin embargo, en aquel momento, cuando su cara inglesa y lejana eclipsaba a las más próximas, a las lívidas parisienses, no era la sombra romántica de ese caballero la que se interponía entre ellos. Quizá fuera el brillo de París lo que le hacía ver las cosas tan claras; pero, en cualquier caso, recordaba con ternura algo que le dijo la última vez que le vio y que le emocionó mucho en ese momento. Se le había ocurrido comentar con ella que muerta ya Pinnie, y exceptuando a mister Vetch, ella era la persona que le conocía desde hacía más tiempo. Millicent contestó que mister Vetch no podría vivir siempre, y que ella entonces tendría la satisfacción de ser su más vieja amiga.

—Bueno, pero yo tampoco viviré siempre —dijo Hyacinth.

Cuando ella le preguntó si estaba enfermo del pecho, el chico contestó:

—Que yo sepa, no, pero a lo mejor me hacen papilla en una reyerta.

Millicent se enfadó y habló con desprecio de su manía de tomarlo todo a broma, como si se tratara de saber lo que le gustaba a un vendedor ambulante o a cualquier otro tipo del East End, y él aprovechó para preguntarle si estaba satisfecha con las condiciones sociales y si creía que no debía hacerse nada en favor de una gente que, después de estar toda su vida ganando un salario de hambre, no podía esperar más recompensa que el espantoso asilo y la fosa común.

—Si fuera a costa tuya, no estaría satisfecha con nada —contestó con toda naturalidad y mirándole con su hermosa intrepidez. Luego añadió—: Puedo decirte una cosa, Robinson, que como alguien te luciera una mala pasada…

No terminó la frase y echó hacia atrás la cabeza con el aire de un jefe coronado de plumas y, al preguntarle Hyacinth qué ocurriría en ese caso, añadió:

—Pues que todavía quedaría aquí una para tomar el relevo. En el tono con que hizo esa declaración había algo valiente y decidido. A Hyacinth se le antojó un extraño destino —aunque no más extraño que las circunstancias de su nacimiento— que su memoria llegara a estar representada por la chica de una tienda que llevaba los brazos cubiertos de pulseras falsas; pero se acordó también de que Millicent era un hermoso ejemplar de mujer y de un tipo nada quejumbroso por cierto, y que su temperamento fuerte y libre era capaz de conciliar muchas disparidades.

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Por otro lado, ni la fuerza de París bastaba a transformar la impresión que le había causado su trato con Paul Muniment durante las semanas que siguieron a la muerte de Pinnie, una impresión mucho más dura que toda idea de olvido o renunciación que pudiera referirse a Millicent. Por qué había estado teñida de tristeza era algo que no acababa de ver claro, pues la voz de Muniment no se distinguió de las otras en el tono general de aprobación que provocó la noticia de que el chico iba a cultivar uno de los placeres más característicos de la nobleza y que fue tan unánimemente entusiasta que ponía su viaje a París bajo una perspectiva casi ridícula. ¿Qué les habría entrado a todos?, ¿pensaban acaso que sólo servía para divertirse? El más celoso había sido mister Vetch, pero los otros le daban palmaditas en la espalda, casi en la misma forma en que sus colegas de Soho lo hacían a cualquiera cuando anunciaban que su «señora» le había hecho padre una vez más. Ése fue el tono de Poupin y también el de su mujer; y hasta el pobre Shinkel, a quien había encontrado en Lisson Grove, con su eterno vendaje en el cuello, creyó necesario decir que, puestos a viajar, una excursioncita por el Rin podría abrirle los ojos a grandes maravillas. Los Poupin derramaron lágrimas de júbilo, y las famosas cartas, que yacían día tras día sobre la chimenea del cuartito que Hyacinth ocupaba en un *hôtel garni*, una casa altísima y un poco ladeada de la rue Jacob (la recomendación venía también de Lisson Trove, pues el *garni* era de una prima de *madame* Eustache), esos valiosos documentos los había preparado el afectuoso exiliado muchos días antes de que su amigo emprendiera el viaje. Fue casi un alivio para Hyacinth que el viejo Crook, único disidente declarado, le dijera que estaba haciendo el idiota por ir a gastarse el dinero con los malditos franceses. No cabía duda de que al ilustre patrón le molestaba que se introdujeran innovaciones; si lo que quería era divertirse un poco, ¿por qué no lo hacía como se había hecho en Solio desde tiempo inmemorial, con un viajecito a Brighton o dos o tres días de borrachera? Crook tenía razón. Hyacinth reconocía que era un idiota, y lo único que le molestaba un poco era no poder explicar por qué no pretendía no serlo y se sentía con cierto derecho a esa compensación.

Paul, por supuesto, sí adivinaba por qué, y daba su aprobación sonriente y con una candidez que a Hyacinth le producía un inexplicable dolor. Ya sabía que su amigo le consideraba un tipo esencialmente ornamental, apto sólo para las formas más suaves de la energía subversiva, como si su papel se redujera a mostrar que la revolución no había de ser por fuerza algo exclusivo de bestias y analfabetos; pero al ver el alegre estoicismo con que Muniment afrontaba el sacrificio a que estaba condenado, Hyacinth se vio en la necesidad de modificar un tanto el concepto que tenía de su amigo. Y el resultado de ese proceso no fue admirarlo menos, sino sentirse casi aterrado ante él. Desde el principio le había pasado algo parecido, pero después tenía que cargar con el peso de tan perfecta congruencia. Hyacinth comprendía que él nunca hubiera podido llegar tan alto. Era capaz de haber hecho esa promesa a Hoffendahl y mantenerla; pero no habría podido tener la misma fortaleza de ánimo cuando se tratara de otro, no podría nunca desprenderse de un sentimiento personal con tanta efectividad, y empujar a un chico a quien según todas las apariencias quería, a hacer un «trabajo» tan terrible. Y que Muniment le quería era algo que no se le había ocurrido poner en duda. Lo demostraba más que nunca en aquellos momentos, y nunca había estado de tan buen humor ni tan comunicativo; era como un hermano mayor que sabe que el «pequeño» es listo y se siente orgulloso de ello cuando no hay gente delante. Ese aire de suprimir la camaradería que solía adoptar en el Sol y Luna no aparecía en otros sitios; en Audley Court le hacía rabiar a veces, pero sólo porque le tomaba demasiado en serio. Su incondicional amigo no sabía cómo explicárselo: el episodio del que Hoffendahl era figura central parecía no haberle hecho cambiar de actitud. Para ser un servidor tan fiel, un agente efectivo, era demasiado cándido, la amargura y la denuncia no asomaban casi nunca a sus labios. Criticar las cosas —una vez visto que todo *estaba* mal— le suponía muy poco tiempo. Era como si sintiera vergüenza de quejarse; y, en realidad, en los últimos meses no tenía motivo de queja especial. Había tenido un aumento en el laboratorio y estaba pensando buscar una habitación más grande para su hermana. No pulsaba nunca

la cuerda patética en beneficio de los demás, estaba convencido de que no servía para nada, y lo más que hacía para explayarse sobre los males de la humanidad era aludir a ciertas estadísticas, algunos «informes» sobre remuneraciones en la industria, solicitudes de empleo o disminución de las horas de trabajo. Estaba muy versado en todos esos asuntos y se movía entre ellos con tal aridez científica y estadística que Hyacinth necesitaba hacer un gran esfuerzo para seguirle. Tan sencillo y bueno como era, preocupado y atento al sufrimiento de los animales, compasivo con los insectos, y aficionado incluso a besar a los niños sucios de Audley Court, tenía de cuando en cuando unos destellos satíricos que demostraban que apreciaba poco a los pobres, y que si no se forjaba ilusiones con la gente que lo había acaparado todo, tampoco se las hacía con quienes tan claramente no habían conseguido hacerlo. Era espantosamente razonador, y por eso le admiraba tanto Hyacinth, que deseaba serlo también, pero lo encontraba dificilísimo.

La falta de pasión de Muniment, su frialdad natural, el conocimiento exacto que tenía de las cosas, su forma de mantenerse limpio (salvo las manos manchadas del laboratorio) en circunstancias tan propicias a ensuciarse, constituían una serie de cualidades que su admirador siempre había considerado envidiables. Y la más envidiable de todas era la facultad para ahogar sus sentimientos personales cuando estaba en juego el interés público, y poder, sin embargo, seguir dando la impresión de que se preocupaba por otros intereses menores. A Hyacinth le parecía que de haber sido él quien le hubiera presentado a Hoffendahl un joven para llevar a cabo sus propósitos, una vez que Hoffendahl le hubiese aceptado y todo hubiera quedado decidido, habría preferido no volver a ver al joven en su vida. Ésa era su debilidad, pero Paul se las arreglaba de una manera muy distinta. Debe decirse también que no había aludido ni una sola vez a su visita al gran mandamás y que Hyacinth, por orgullo, tampoco hablaba del asunto. Si su amigo no tenía intención de suspirar por él, tampoco iba a rogarle que lo hiciera (y menos aún no deseándolo) con alusiones de impaciencia. Al principio le sorprendió que Muniment se prestara a respaldar un posible asesinato; pero, después de todo, no era un hombre de ideas estrechas (daba la impresión de estar siempre madurándolas) y, si con un tiro de pistola podía arreglarse algo, no sería él quien presentara objeciones pedantes. Bien es verdad que en lo tocante a su tranquila aceptación del compromiso en que pudiera verse, Hyacinth no quería negarle el derecho a tener sus dudas; pensaba que quizá Muniment tuviera buenas razones para creer que la señal definitiva no había de llegar nunca, y que lo único que estaba haciendo era poner a prueba los nervios de un encuadernador. Entonces, ¿por qué le interesaba que el encuadernador se fuera a París? Eso era algo que no le habría importado lo más mínimo de haber sabido que en definitiva no había nada que temer. Despreciaba la ociosidad y, aunque más de una vez se hubiera mostrado indulgente ante el amor furtivo que su amigo sentía por el bienestar, lo más probable era que le hubiese dicho:

—¿Que quieres ir a París? ¡Vete al diablo! ¿No te ha bastado con irte a pacer al campo una temporada y haber estado allí retozando con la señora esa, y no sería mucho mejor que volvieras a coger las herramientas antes de que se te olvide manejarlas?

Rosy le había dicho algo parecido y, cualquiera que fuese su intención, había resultado poco menos cáustica que el viejo Crook; le había dicho que el señor Robinson estaba dedicado a darse la gran vida como ella, y que debía felicitarle por disponer de medios y de tiempo. ¡El tiempo, ésa era la gran cosa!, y ella podía hablar con conocimiento de causa porque era una de las ventajas de que había disfrutado siempre. Y comentó también —quizá estuviera equivocada— que su buena fortuna podía compararse también a la suya por tener una amiga de alcurnia (una bendición después de perder a *miss* Pynsent) que le colmaba de atenciones. Rose Muniment, en resumen, había estado más inaguantable que nunca.

El bulevar adquiría cada vez más brillo a medida que avanzaba la noche, y Hyacinth pensaba si tendría derecho a ocupar la misma mesa tanto tiempo. El teatro que estaba al otro lado de la calle descargaba en ese momento su multitud; la gente se apiñaba en las aceras y en la terraza del café; caballeros acompañados de señoras a las que ya sabía cómo llamar —*des femmes très chic*— entraban por las puertas de Tortoni. El efluvio nocturno de París parecía elevarse con mayor riqueza, notar y quedar suspendido en el aire, mezclarse con la luminosidad general y dar como resultado un millar de solicitaciones y oportunidades dirigidas, eso sí, a quienes pudieran responder a ellas con el tintineo de unas cuantas monedas de oro sueltas por los bolsillos. A Hyacinth los recuerdos no le habían adormecido, sino todo lo contrario; estaba inquieto y nervioso, y notaba que un agradable terror hacia el lugar y la hora se le metía en la sangre. Pero era ya casi medianoche y se levantó para volver a casa, dirigiéndose por el bulevar hacia la Magdalena. Bajó por la rue Royale, donde reinaba una calma relativa y, cuando llegó a la plaza de la Concordia, para cruzar el puente que desemboca en el Corps Législatif, se encontró casi solo. Había dejado atrás el hormiguero humano y las calles atestadas, y los grandes espacios de la espléndida plaza aparecían tranquilos a la luz de las estrellas. Se oía el ruido de las fuentes y casi podía escucharse el murmullo del viento en el bosquecillo de las Tullerías y en la vaga extensión de los Campos Elíseos. El lugar mismo —la

plaza de Luis XV, la plaza de la Revolución— le había producido una emoción especial desde el día de su llegada; había sentido desde el primer momento el tremendo carácter histórico que tenía. Había creído ver la guillotina en el centro, en el sitio ocupado por el misterioso obelisco, y las carretas cargadas con las víctimas alrededor del círculo, ennoblecido con las estatuas a las ciudades de Francia. La gran leyenda de la Revolución francesa, un amanecer en un mar de sangre, se le presentaba allí con mayor realidad que en ningún otro sitio; y lo que ante todo veía no eran su maldad y su horror, sino su soberbia energía, no el espíritu de destrucción, sino el espíritu creativo que había habido en ella. Esa sombra quedaba borrada por la belleza moderna de fuentes y estatuas, la soberbia perspectiva y la disposición del conjunto; y mientras andaba por allí despacio, antes de cruzar el Sena, se apoderó de él un sentimiento súbito, una angustia que le encogió el corazón, el sentimiento de todo lo que podía atarle a uno al mundo, de la dulzura de no morir, del hechizo de las grandes ciudades, el encanto de viajar y hacer descubrimientos y la generosidad de poder admirarse. Se le saltaron las lágrimas, como le había sucedido varias veces en los últimos seis meses, y una pregunta queda pero amarga se le vino a los labios. «¿Cómo pudo… cómo pudo?». La pregunta se refería a Paul Muniment, pues Hyacinth había soñado que existía una religión de la amistad.

Tres semanas más tarde estaba en Venecia, desde donde dirigió una carta a la princesa Casamassima de la que reproduzco los principales pasajes:

> *Ésta es probablemente la última vez que le escribo antes de volver a Londres. Como ya ha estado en este lugar, podrá comprender con facilidad por qué aquí, precisamente aquí, siento deseos de hacerlo. Querida princesa, qué ciudad tan maravillosa, qué inefables impresiones y qué revelación tan exquisita. Tengo una habitación en una pequeña explanada y enfrente de una iglesia antigua que tiene la fachada cubierta de losas de mármol; en las hendiduras de las losas crecen florecillas silvestres cuyo nombre no conozco. En la puerta de la iglesia hay colgada una cortina de cuero vieja y oscura, tan gruesa como un colchón y con botones como si fuera un sofá; y no para de ir de un lado a otro mientras entran y salen de la iglesia mujeres y chicas que llevan la cabeza cubierta con un chal y calzan zuecos de madera. En el centro de la explanada hay una fuente que parece aún más vieja que la iglesia; tiene un aspecto muy primitivo, y creo que quienes la pusieron fueron los primeros pobladores, los que pasaron a Venecia desde el continente, desde Aquilea. Verá que he tragado ya mucha información histórica, y supongo que no se sorprenderá porque no ha vuelto a sorprenderse de nada desde el día en que descubrió que sabía algo de Schopenhauer. Puedo asegurarle que hoy no me acuerdo para nada de ese misógino rancio, porque miro con mucha simpatía a las mujeres y a las chicas que van a la fuente haciendo ruido con los zuecos y con el cántaro de cobre en la cabeza. La cara de las chicas venecianas tiene una asombrosa dulzura, y produce un efecto incomparable cuando su óvalo pálido y triste (todas parecen mal alimentadas) está enmarcado por el chal viejo y descolorido. Tienen un pelo precioso, que no ha conocido las tenacillas, y andan juntas de dos en dos o de tres en tres cogidas del brazo y sin mirar nunca a los ojos —así que no importa que las mire uno—, y llevan vestidos baratos de algodón, con unos pliegues sueltos, que tienen una línea tan bonita como todas las cosas de Italia. El tiempo es espléndido y me aso de calor, pero me gusta; por lo visto estaba hecho para que me espetaran como un pollo, y ahora descubro que he pasado frío oda mi vida, hasta cuando creía que tenía calor. No he visto uno solo de los hermosos patricios que posaban para los grandes pintores, aquellos señores gordos con cabellos de oro y perlas entrelazadas; pero estoy estudiando italiano para hablar con las chicas que trabajan en las fábricas de collares, porque estoy decidido a hacer que una o dos de ellas me miren por fin. Cuando han llenado los cántaros en la fuente, da gusto verlas ponérselos en la cabeza y andar otra vez sobre las lustrosas piedras de Venecia. Me encanta estar en un país donde las mujeres no llevan esos odiosos gorritos británicos. Ni siquiera entre las mujeres de mi clase —perdone la expresión que recuerdo que le molestaba— he visto en mi vida una chica joven que asomara las narices a la puerta sin habérselo puesto antes; y si usted las hubiera tratado tanto como las he tratado yo, sabría la degradación a que conduce una imposición semejante. El suelo de mi cuarto está hecho de ladrillos pequeños, y para refrescar el ambiente en esta temperatura, lo rocían, como ya sabrá usted, con agua. Como sigan rociándolo mucho, dentro de poco tiempo podré nadar; las persianas verdes están bajadas y el sitio resulta una buena piscina. La luz ardiente de la plaza entra por las rendijas. Fumo cigarrillos y en los momentos de descanso me tumbo en un sofá descolorido que hay en un rincón. Cuando estoy allí tengo al alcance las obras de Leopardi y un diccionario de segunda mano. Soy muy feliz, más feliz que en toda mi vida, salvo cuando estuve en Medley y no me preocupo por nada sino por el momento presente. No durará mucho, porque estoy casi sin dinero. Cuando termine la carta saldré a dar una vuelta por ahí, en esta espléndida tarde veneciana; y pasaré la noche en esa maravillosa plaza de San Marcos, que parece un gran salón al aire libre, escuchando música y sintiendo la brisa que se cuela entre esas dos extrañas columnas de la* piazzetta *que parecen formar un pórtico para ella. Casi no puedo creer que soy*

yo quien cuenta todas estas cosas tan bonitas; me digo más de doce veces al día que no es Hyacinth Robinson el que lo hace, y tengo que pellizcarme las piernas para saber que no estoy soñando. Pero dentro de poco, cuando vuelva al ejercicio de mi profesión en las dulzuras de Soho, tendré pruebas más que sobradas para convencerme; lo notaré en seguida por la vida y la condena que me esperan.

Eso significará, sin duda, que estoy desmoralizado. Pero no será usted la que en este caso pueda tirar la primera piedra; porque mi desmoralización empezó en el mismo momento en que me acerqué a usted. Querida princesa, quizá yo le haya hecho bien a usted, pero a mí no me ha hecho demasiado. Espero que entienda lo que quiero decir con eso y no lo considere una impertinencia o un atrevimiento. Puede que yo le haya ayudado a comprender y a penetrar en la miseria del pueblo, aunque puedo afirmar que yo tampoco sé mucho, pero usted le ha hecho seguir a mi imaginación otros derroteros muy diferentes. De todas maneras, no pretendo echarle la culpa de que me haya olvidado casi totalmente de la sagrada causa con mis últimas aventuras. Y no es que me hayan faltado ocasiones para verlo, pues quizá el resultado más claro de extender uno su propio horizonte sea ver que, a medida que lo hacemos, comprendemos mejor que la necesidad, el trabajo y el sufrimiento son el destino de la inmensa mayoría de los hombres. Los he encontrado en todas partes, pero no he prestado atención a eso. Perdone mi cínica confesión. Lo que me ha chocado han sido los grandes logros que el hombre ha sido capaz de alcanzar, a pesar de todo, la espléndida acumulación de los privilegiados, a la que sin duda los muchos desgraciados han contribuido a su manera también. Europa entera parece estar cubierta de ellos, y la verdad es que han acaparado mi atención. Se me antojan algo inestimablemente precioso, y me he dado cuenta mejor que nunca de lo mal que entiendo lo que usted y Poupin piensan hacer con ellas en la gran rectificación final. Querida princesa, hay cosas que me dolería mucho verla tocar, aunque fuera con sus divinas manos, y —¿debo confesarle le fond de la pensée*, como solía decir?— me siento capaz de luchar por ellas. Puede llamarme traidor, pues ya conoce la obligación a que me siento ligado siempre y por encima de todo. Los monumentos y los tesoros artísticos, los grandes palacios y propiedades, las conquistas del saber y del buen gusto, toda la fábrica de la civilización tal como la conocemos, basada, si se quiere, en el despotismo, la crueldad, la exclusión, el monopolio y la rapacidad del pasado, pero gracias a los cuales el mundo no es una pura estafa y la vida resulta más agradable, todo eso nuestro amigo Hoffendahl parece que no lo estima en nada y que quiere sustituirlo por algo en lo que no puedo creer como creo en las cosas que han estado mezcladas a las lágrimas y anhelos de generaciones enteras. Ya sabe lo que admiro a Hoffendahl —por no hablar más que de él—, pero si hay algo que pueda ver bien claro es que no iba a sentir la más mínima compasión por esta incomparable y abominable Venecia. Sería capaz de cortar en tiras los techos pintados por Veronés para que le tocase un trocito a cada uno. Yo no quiero que todo el mundo tenga un pedacito de lo que sea, y me produce verdadero horror esa especie de envidia que hay en el fondo de toda idea de hacer una redistribución. Dirá que hablo como me parece, y mientras me encuentro a mis anchas en una ciudad preciosa y fumando pitillos sentado en un diván rojo, y le doy permiso para que se burle si cuando vuelva a Londres, sin un penique en el bolsillo, hablo de otra manera. No sé de dónde me viene, pero en los últimos tres meses se me ha ido metiendo sin sentirlo una gran desconfianza hacia esa actitud resentida, ese no poder soportar las posiciones y las fortunas que están por encima de las nuestras; y un miedo, además, de haber podido obrar en otro tiempo movido por esos motivos, y una piadosa esperanza de que si tengo que irme al otro mundo siendo todavía joven, no sea al menos con esa odiosa mancha sobre mi alma.*

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Después de volver a Londres pasó los primeros días dedicado a lo que él suponía era buscar alojamiento; pero en realidad trataba de encontrar una forma de ganarse la vida, un esfuerzo que en modo alguno le resultaba fácil ni agradable. Como le había dicho a la princesa, estaba desmoralizado, y la perspectiva de volver a subir la sucia escalera del taller de Crook se le hacía más cuesta arriba que nunca. Andaba bordeando el abismo antes de tirarse otra vez de cabeza a Soho: no quería volver al taller antes de haberse instalado, y demoraba la instalación para no tener que volver. No vio a nadie en esos días, ni siquiera a mister Vetch; esperaba visitar al violinista cuando no pareciera ya un mendigo o un hombre que iba a pedir algo; cuando hubiera recobrado el empleo y pudiera dar una dirección, como le había oído decir a Sholto. Fue a South Street, no con intención de entrar, sino porque le apetecía ver la casa, y quedó sorprendido al ver el anuncio de una subasta en las ventanas de la última residencia de la princesa. No esperaba encontrarla en Londres, y la última vez que había sabido de ella, tres semanas antes, no había dicho nada de los proyectos que tenía; pero se sintió desconcertado ante aquella indicación tan palpable de que se había ido. Sin embargo, comprendía que en el fondo aquello era algo que siempre había esperado; parecía demostrar lo fundadas que eran sus sospechas en todo lo relacionado con la princesa, un presentimiento vago de que en cualquier momento podría tender la mano y ver que había desaparecido de su lado. Decidió llamar a la puerta y pedir noticias de ella, pero no contestó nadie a sus llamadas: la quietud de una tarde de agosto —había pasado ya un año desde su primera visita— flotaba en el ambiente, las persianas estaban bajadas y el encargado debía de estar ausente. Ante todas esas cosas, se encontró completamente perdido; lo único que podía hacer era escribir a su maravillosa amiga a Medley. Estaba seguro de que le entregarían la carta, aunque el plazo del alquiler de la casa debía de haber terminado hacía varias semanas. El capitán Sholto era un intermediario posible, una probable fuente de información; pero Hyacinth por nada del mundo hubiera recurrido a él para pedir un servicio como ése.

Se marchó de South Street con un extraño peso en el corazón; la ignorancia parecía golpearle en el alma, era como si tuviera la fuerza de una amenaza profundamente inquietante. No fue a ver a Crook hasta quedarse sin un penique. Claro que ese momento no tardó en llegar. Había desembarcado en London Bridge con diecisiete peniques en el bolsillo, y había aguantado con ellos tres días. Cuando llegó a Lomax Place encontró al violinista comiéndose una chuleta antes de ir al teatro; invitó a Hyacinth a participar y mandó por otro jarro de cerveza. Se llevó al chico con él al teatro y, como en esa época los espectadores eran muy escasos, no tuvo dificultad en proporcionarle un sitio. Daba la impresión de querer tenerle bajo su mano, y le miró de una forma muy rara por encima de las gafas —en los últimos años ya no llevaba monóculo sino unos lentes mucho más caseros— al oírle decir que había encontrado un refugio no en el barrio de siempre, sino en los aledaños inexplorados de Westminster. Lo que le había decidido a cogerlo era que el viaje a Camberwell, desde aquella parte de la ciudad, era relativamente corto; había sufrido mucho antes de morir Pinnie por la tremenda distancia que le separaba de sus mejores amigos. La imagen de Paul Muniment le encogía el corazón; pero, a pesar de todo, la idea de pasar de cuando en cuando una tarde en Audley Court seguía siendo uno de los entretenimientos más asequibles de su incierto futuro. Podía haberse ido, sin más, a vivir a Camberwell, pero eso le alejaba demasiado de su lugar de trabajo, y en Westminster estaba más cerca del taller de Crook que cuando vivía en Lomax Place. Le dijo a mister Vetch que, si *él* lo deseaba, estaba dispuesto a buscar otra casa en Pentonville. Pero el viejo le contestó que sentiría imponerle esa carga; si se lo pedía, Hyacinth podría creer que deseaba vigilarle.

—¿Qué quiere decir vigilarme?

Mister Vetch había empezado a afinar el violín y siguió rascándolo un poco antes de contestar:

—Quiero decir lo que he dicho siempre. Sabrás que cuando estabas en Lomax Place siempre tenía los ojos puestos en ti. Te vigilaba lo mismo que un niño que está al borde de un estanque vigila el barquito que

ha construido y echado a navegar.

—No era mucho lo que podía descubrir. Después de todo, era muy poco lo que veía de mí.

—Pero hacía lo que podía con ese poco. Siempre era mejor que nada.

Hyacinth puso su mano sobre el brazo del viejo, no había notado nunca un cariño tan profundo hacia él, ni siquiera en el momento de darle las treinta libras antes de él marcharse al extranjero.

—Vendré a verle, por supuesto.

—Te agradecí mucho las cartas —dijo mister Vetch, como si no hubiera oído sus últimas palabras y sin dejar de tocar.

Había conservado siempre, incluso entre el descuido general de su vejez, esa marca de buena crianza inglesa (compuesta de elementos tan dispares), cierta timidez y aversión a hacer frases, que se reflejaba en su manera de agradecer los favores, y que a pesar del tono apresurado tenía siempre un acento de sinceridad.

A Hyacinth le interesaba muy poco la comedia, que era una reposición nada divertida; había estado en el Théâtre Français y conservaba el recuerdo de su tradicional manera de representar las obras, y todo otro estilo de interpretación no pasaba de parecerle una simple pantomima. Estaba en una de las butacas delanteras, al lado de la orquesta; y mientras la cosa seguía adelante —o más bien atrás, le parecía que iba siempre para atrás— sus pensamientos andaban muy lejos del mísero escenario y de sus tablas empolvadas, dándole vueltas a una cuestión que no se le quitaba de la cabeza en las últimas horas. La princesa era una *capricciosa*, al menos eso decía *madame* Grandoni, y aquella casa vacía de South Street ¿no sería un signo de que el capricho particular en que se había visto envuelto había llegado a su fin? Al volver a Londres, el deseo de estar con ella en los mismos términos en que había estado en Medley había empezado a dolerle como una pena muy grande o un mal amenazador; tenía un sentimiento muy agudo de que si no podía contar absolutamente con ella, era que le había engañado de la manera más cruel y odiosa. Sin embargo, la maravilla de aquel otro tiempo, en medio del silencio que le había sucedido, seguía siendo una maravilla. Las circunstancias le habían facilitado extraordinariamente su visita, y no estaba nada claro que volvieran a ser tan favorables y que lo que había sido posible durante unos días fuera también posible durante más tiempo y en medio de las ceremonias y complicaciones de Londres. Hyacinth se sentía más pobre que nunca, sobre todo después de haber tenido dinero y haberlo gastado, mientras que en otros tiempos no había podido hacerlo. Ni por un momento se arrepentía de haber derrochado su fortuna, pues consideraba que había hecho un buen negocio al ganar algo mucho más valioso. Lo que había ganado era una gran experiencia; una experiencia que sería aún más rica cuando pudiera hablar de ella con la única persona a quien le interesaba, y que sabría volver a encontrar las condiciones apropiadas para hacerlo. Su pobreza no sería obstáculo para su amistad mientras tuviera un par de piernas que le llevaran hasta su puerta; porque le gustaba más mal vestido que emperejilado, y le había hecho demasiadas promesas, y habían tenido demasiadas citas y barajado juntos demasiadas ideas para que cualquiera de los dos se echase atrás ante unos obstáculos que no pasaban de ser una parte más del convencionalismo general. Tenía que ir con ella a los suburbios, llevarla a los peores sitios de Londres —necesitaría conocerlos antes— y mostrarle la verdad de los horrores que ella soñaba con borrar del mundo. A él los suburbios habían dejado de interesarle, y tenía motivos para no desear pasarse el tiempo que le quedaba estudiando cosas desagradables; pero lo haría por haberlo prometido. Aunque sintiera poco interés y actuara de un modo mecánico, sabía que todos los horrores tomaban un tinte dorado si estaban asociados a ella. Pero ¿qué pasaría si hubiera cambiado, si quisiera valerse de ese privilegio de no dar disculpas que él creía era el mayor lujo de los afortunados, al menos en sus relaciones con los que no eran nadie? ¿Qué pasaría si con una insolencia que él imaginaba tenía agazapada en algún repliegue de su naturaleza, aunque nunca hubiera salido a primer plano, sacudiera su preciosa cabeza para decirle que era demasiado vulgar y que no quería saber más de él? Su imaginación se la representaba aquella noche en sitios donde una barrera de luz deslumbrante le cerraba el paso y hasta le impedía llamarla. La veía rodeada de gente, en unos grandes salones donde «los duques» se apoderaban de ella, sonriente, satisfecha y cubierta de joyas. Cuando la visión cobró mayor intensidad se sintió más tranquilo al pensar que personalmente no podría rechazarle mientras estuviera tan comprometida como —al parecer con éxito— había intentado estar, y que no le sería fácil liberarse de toda aquella maraña oculta. En Medley le había contado muchas más cosas, y el joven, con un júbilo extraño y perverso, recordaba que realmente había ido muy lejos.

En los entreactos de aquel espectáculo tan tonto, mister Vetch se quedaba en el sitio de la orquesta, mientras sus colegas bajaban al pequeño foso que había debajo del escenario, se apoyaba en la barandilla y le hacía preguntas a su amigo, al tiempo que recorría con la vista el sucio teatro cuyo techo ahumado y cuyas galerías deslucidas había contemplado durante tantos años. Recordó una vez más las cartas de

Hyacinth y dijo:

—Ya sabes que eran unas cartas inteligentes; me entretenían muchísimo. Pero al leerlas me acordaba de la pobre Pinnie: me hubiera gustado que pudiera escucharlas; se habría sentido feliz.

—Sí, pobre Pinnie —dijo Hyacinth, mientras su amigo continuaba:

—Yo estuve en París en 1846; estaba en un hotel pequeño de la rue Mogador. Por lo que dices en tus cartas veo que todo está cambiado. ¿Existe todavía la rue Mogador? Sí, todo está muy cambiado. Me imagino que será mucho más bonito, pero a mí me gustaba como estaba entonces. En fin, supongo que de todas formas te animó mucho y que has sido verdaderamente feliz.

—¿Y por qué iba a necesitar que me animaran? Ya estaba bastante contento.

El violinista adelantó su cara, vieja y pensativa; tenía esa suavidad gastada que denota un trabajo sedentario, treinta años pasados en un sitio cerrado y lleno de gente, entre el humo de las lámparas y el olor a pintura de los decorados:

—Creía que estabas triste por Pinnie.

—¿Cuando me lancé con tanta avidez sobre la propuesta de que hiciera un viaje? ¡Pobre Pinnie!

—Bueno, espero que el mundo te parezca ahora un poco mejor. No debemos sacar conclusiones mientras somos demasiado jóvenes.

—¡Huy!, ya las he sacado: el mundo es un lugar sensacional.

—Tanto como sensacional, no; pero a mí me gusta igual que un par de zapatos viejos, y la idea de tener que ponerme unos nuevos me gusta mucho menos.

—¿De qué podría quejarme? ¿Qué he conocido sino cariño? La gente ha hecho muchísimo por mí.

—Sí, desde luego les has gustado. Pero todo eso está muy bien —murmuró mister Vetch, y empezó a arañar su violín otra vez.

Lo que a Hyacinth se le quedó grabado de aquel coloquio fue que un veterano a quien consideraba verdaderamente cultivado hubiera pensado que sus cartas eran inteligentes. Sólo habría deseado haberlas escrito mejor, y no tenía la menor duda de que era capaz de hacerlo.

No es difícil imaginarse lo que le gustaron las primeras horas que pasó en el taller de Crook al volver al trabajo, y cómo fue el recibimiento que le hicieron sus camaradas, a quien encontró en las mismas actitudes y con los mismos trajes (conocía y odiaba cada una de las prendas que llevaban), y con las mismas bromas primitivas a flor de labios. Sus sentimientos estaban entremezclados: el lugar y la gente le parecían odiosas, pero encontraba un encanto especial en el manejo de las herramientas. Dio un suspiro de alivio al descubrir que todavía le gustaba su trabajo y que recobraba todo su enjambre de ideas sobre lomos y cantos. Se le presentaban en una forma más brillante y sugestiva, y tuvo la satisfacción de ver que su gusto había mejorado, que se había purificado con la experiencia, y que a través de las cubiertas de un libro podía expresarse un número de ideas asombroso. Por raro que parezca, y prueba sin duda de que era un verdadero artista, las impresiones que había recibido en los últimos meses parecían mezclarse y confundirse con los mismos recursos de su arte y quedar abiertas a un «rendimiento» técnico. Había decidido seguir adelante como si nada pesara sobre él, y no tenía intención de continuar siendo encuadernador el resto de su vida; porque ese medio sólo podría traducir después algunas de sus ideas. Sin embargo, de momento, ese oficio era un recurso, un recurso no despreciable, y tenía motivos particulares y generales para intentar nuevos vuelos, la obra exquisita que tenía que hacer el próximo año para la princesa, una obra que no dudaba le debía. Cuando hubiera pagado esa deuda y otros atrasos que tenía pendientes, se proponía escribir alguna cosa. Estaba muy lejos de saber qué sería; lo único seguro era que sería muy notable y que no tendría nada que ver con un nuevo plan sobre la cuestión social. Ése sería su paso hacia… la literatura: encuadernar el libro era una cosa que estaba muy bien pero siempre sería mucho menos importante que escribirlo. Hyacinth había pensado más de una vez que sería muy bonito escribir una gran elegía.

No es extraño que entre tales sueños se diera cuenta de la poca altura que alcanzaban sus viejos camaradas. No tenían más que una idea: que había heredado un millar de libras y se había ido a Francia a gastárselas con una señora despampanante. Conocía de antemano la difusión de la leyenda, y hacía cuanto podía por admitirla, siguiendo el camino más sencillo, es decir, no negar nada, sino coger la bola y lanzarla más lejos, aumentándola y adornándola con humor hasta que Grugan y Roker y Hotchin y todos los demás, que le daban la impresión de no haberse lavado desde que los dejó, empezaran a dar muestras de comprender cómo había podido gastar una suma tan grande en tan corto espacio de tiempo. La importancia de semejante hazaña le facilitó mucho la vuelta a su sitio; podía ver que, aunque el trato recibido fuera más bien insolente, la idea de que era muy listo y de que los resortes de esa listeza resultaban un tanto secretos había cobrado fuerza gracias a ella. Hyacinth no dejaba de sentirse halagado ante la idea de que alguien se imaginara, aunque fueran Grugan, Roker y Hotchin, que era capaz de deshacerse de un millar de libras en

menos de cinco meses, y más al tener en cuenta que aún no estaba demostrado que lo fuera. En conjunto, se las arregló para salir bastante bien librado, y pudo ver que los hombres de Crook no daban síntoma alguno de padecer la envidia social que aparecía siempre en el fondo de toda pretensión de cambio. Era sin duda una casualidad y no se debía a que todos ellos fueran obreros especializados —Crook no tenía otros— y estuvieran por tanto seguros de tener siempre trabajo; era imposible mayor habilidad que la que Paul Muniment mostraba en su especial cometido y, sin embargo, aunque no por envidia, era partidario de la implacable restitución. Lo que más le chocaba, una vez acostumbrado al delantal y a inclinar la espalda sobre la baqueteada mesa, era la increíble paciencia de los otros que habían seguido con la espalda encorvada y sintiendo el roce de todos aquellos trapos sucios mientras él se daba la gran vida en la casa de Medley, andaba por bulevares y museos y se dedicaba a admirar la cara de las chicas venecianas. Sus relaciones con Poupin eran muy particulares; pero las explicaciones que le debía al sensible francés no eran de las que podían molestarle mucho, ya que estaba decidido a evitar en lo posible todo roce con una rectitud que resultaba a veces tan irritante como un arnés mal encajado. Había más pena que enfado en la cara de Poupin al enterarse de que su amigo y discípulo había desperdiciado las grandes oportunidades que le ofrecía.

—Te estás enfriando, hijo mío; a ti te pasa algo. ¿Tienes la debilidad de felicitarte de que se ha hecho algo o de que la humanidad sufre una milésima menos? *Enfin*, allá tú con tu conciencia.

—¿Acaso cree que quiero desentenderme? —gruñó Hyacinth.

Todas esas frases sobre la humanidad, que en otros tiempos le hacían vibrar, le resultaban completamente huecas y rebuscadas.

—No me debes ninguna explicación; la conciencia del individuo es algo absoluto, exceptuando naturalmente a las clases en las que, a causa de la infamia misma en que están fundadas, no puede existir conciencia alguna. A pesar de todo, háblame de mi ciudad; *ella* es divina siempre.

Poupin siguió hablando, pero dio muestras de irritación cuando Hyacinth empezó a hablar de las magníficas creaciones del archimalvado de diciembre. Se encontraba en un terrible dilema ante el cuadro que le presentaban: como parisiense y patriota tenía que sentirse halagado, mas como amante de la libertad no sabía qué cara poner. Le acongojaba tener que admitir que hubiera algo defectuoso en los *seuils sacrés*, pero le resultaba todavía más difícil admitir que pudieran deberle algo bueno al monstruo perjuro del Segundo Imperio, y tampoco podía tolerar que se lo debieran al republicanismo hipócrita y mendaz del régimen anterior, el que la Comuna inspirada había combatido a sangre y fuego.

—Sí, no hay duda de que es muy bonito —dijo por fin—, pero será mucho más bonito todavía cuando sea nuestro.

Esas palabras le hicieron a Hyacinth reintegrarse a su tarea realmente asqueado. En todas partes, en todas partes, se encontraba con la úlcera de la envidia, el ansia de un partido que sólo se unía para así despojar a otro de sus ventajas. Para el viejo Eustache, uno de los «puros», eso resultaba especialmente decepcionante.

XXXII

El último rellano de la escalera de Audley Court estaba siempre oscuro; pero Hyacinth lo encontraba más oscuro que nunca al buscar a tientas el picaporte de la puerta, después de haber oído la chillona voz de Rosy que le decía que entrara. En ese momento le pareció oír otra voz, y eso le preparó un poco para el espectáculo que se presentó a su vista en cuanto Muniment —con el nerviosismo no había conseguido encontrar la aldabilla— le abrió la puerta. Allí estaba su amigo, alto y hospitalario, diciendo con voz fuerte algo jovial que no entendía. Sus ojos atravesaron el umbral en un segundo, pero sus pies tropezaron, para obedecer en seguida al tirón de la mano de Muniment. Su mirada había ido directa y, aunque la habitación de Rosy parecía atestada en cuanto había cuatro personas dentro, no vio más que el objeto que ya tenía en la mente, no vio más que a la princesa Casamassima, sentada junto al sofá bajo, gran innovación introducida durante su ausencia de Londres, y en donde, engalanada con la famosa bata rosa, la señorita Muniment recibía sus visitas. Luego se extrañaba de haberse sorprendido tanto, pues se había dicho muchas veces a sí mismo y a su maravillosa amiga que estaba ya curado de espanto en todo lo que tuviera que ver con ella; era evidente que su conducta no dejaría nunca de ser un estallido de libertad y de sorpresas. Al darse cuenta de que había llegado hasta Camberwell sin su ayuda, sintió cierta contrariedad, y se azoró al entrar en el círculo de los reunidos, cuyo cuarto miembro era la inevitable *lady* Aurora Langrish. ¿Era que su intimidad con la princesa le hacía un poco responsable de haber ido a casa de unas personas que la conocían muy poco y que no veía nada claro por qué se lanzaba sobre ellos con tanta confianza? Pensó también que quizá entonces ya la conocieran mucho; y además el comportamiento de una mujer hablaba por sí mismo cuando era capaz de estar allí sentada como un ángel radiante, vestida con un abrigo y un sombrero muy sencillos e interesadísima en aquel conmovedor rincón de la tierra. Hyacinth comprendió en seguida que su carácter estaba en una fase muy diferente de las que antes había exhibido ante él. La noche en que la conoció parecía estar aureolada por una gran amabilidad, y desde entonces en ningún momento había dejado de dar la sensación de ser una persona afable y compasiva, salvo en relación con su marido, con quien por razones harto comprensibles tenía una dureza absoluta. Esa amabilidad se había hecho más profunda y se había transformado en caridad activa. Se había despojado de su esplendor, pero su belleza seguía siendo la misma; había tomado una actitud humilde para su piadosa excursión y, al lado de Rosy (que con la bata nueva era la más lujosa de las dos) parecía casi la enfermera de un hospital; y a juzgar por la pobreza de su vestido, se lo había tomado muy en serio. Si Hyacinth estaba nervioso, ella no mostraba la menor confusión; era evidente que creía que aquel saloncito extraño y pobre le parecía el sitio más apropiado para que él reapareciera. El silencioso saludo que le hizo con los ojos podía haber expresado muy bien que le estaba esperando, que sabía que vendría y que había habido un acuerdo tácito para que fuera en ese momento. Podían decir otras muchas cosas por el hermoso afecto con que le miraban: «No te fijes demasiado en mí ni se te ocurra ninguna escena. Tengo muchas cosas que decirte, pero recuerda que me queda toda la vida para hacerlo. Piensa sólo en lo que pueda ser más natural o más agradable para esta gente, esta gente a la que encuentro encantadora (¿por qué no me dijiste más sobre ellos?). No resultará un especial cumplido para ellos que te quedes ahí con aire de estar viendo un milagro. Me alegro mucho de que hayas vuelto. La "señoría" temblorosa y agitada es tan chocante como los otros».

El recibimiento que le hicieron a Hyacinth sus viejos amigos fue bastante cordial para hacer olvidar la ironía que asomaba en los votos con que le despidieron quince semanas antes; la bienvenida no fue ruidosa, pero parecía decir que la ocasión, de por sí extraordinaria y agradable, sólo necesitaba su llegada para resultar perfecta. Al cabo de tres minutos de estar allí podía calibrar la impresión producida por la princesa, que había hechizado sin duda a todos los reunidos. Era algo que estaba en el aire, en las caras de todos, en su sonrisa, en sus ojos brillantes y su tono encendido; hasta la mueca enfermiza de Rosy parecía contraerse en éxtasis; tenía la expresión radiante de las grandes ocasiones. *Lady* Aurora parecía más desmelenada que

nunca por el interés y el asombro; las hebras largas y sedosas de su pelo flotaban como telas de araña mientras escuchaba con religiosa atención, con las manos cruzadas sobre el pecho como si estuviera rezando, mientras su respiración subía y bajaba. No había visto jamás una persona como la princesa, pero el miedo que Hyacinth había sentido unos meses antes carecía de fundamento, estaba claro que no la encontraba «llamativa». La encontraba divina y una verdadera revelación de belleza y bondad; y en la habitación iluminada y engrandecida por ella no cabían opiniones contrarias. Era ante todo su belleza la que los había «subyugado», y a Hyacinth no se le ocultaba que a Paul Muniment le había causado la misma impresión que a sus compañeras. Paul no era muy expresivo, ni había perdido la cabeza en aquel momento, pero se había dado cuenta de la diferencia que existía entre una señora amanerada y de relumbrón y el poder real de aquella persona. Era más agradable, hermosa y discreta de lo que un experto en química podía imaginar de antemano. En resumen, tenía a los tres metidos en un puño y había reducido a *lady* Aurora con la misma sencillez que a los otros, mientras les hacía el obsequio de actuar artística y admirablemente ante ellos. Casi no había tenido tiempo Hyacinth de preguntarse cómo habría podido encontrar a los Muniment —no recordaba haberle dado la dirección exacta— cuando dijo que el capitán Sholto había tenido la amabilidad de presentarla; y lo dijo como si le debiera una explicación y como si fuera una mujer que se preocupara de esas cosas. Le sentó más bien como una bofetada saber que había aceptado la mediación del capitán, y las cosas no mejoraron al decir que estaba demasiado impaciente para esperar a que volviera: parecía encontrarse tan a gusto con la vida errante que no se podía estar seguro del momento en que lo hiciera. La princesa podía haber comprendido que para ser feliz le hacía más falta volver a verla pronto que todo lo que pudiera ofrecerle la vida errante. No existía aventura tan prodigiosa como estar pegado a ella y con la mayor fuerza posible.

En la conversación que sostuvo con ella, y que los otros escuchaban con respetuosa curiosidad, descubrió que el capitán Sholto la había llevado allí una semana antes, pero sólo había encontrado a Rose Muniment.

—Me tomé la libertad de volver hoy sin que nadie me invitara porque quería ver a toda la familia —declaró, con tanta naturalidad mirando a Paul y a *lady* Aurora, que sus palabras perdieron todo lo que pudieran tener de impertinencia para su señoría.

Luego dijo con toda franqueza que había tenido cuidado de llegar a una hora en la que pudiera encontrar al señor Muniment en casa:

—Cuando voy a ver a unos caballeros, me gusta por lo menos encontrarlos —añadió.

Y era de verdad tan gran señora, que no había nada que pudiera parecer de mal gusto en su actitud: para ella era la cosa más natural del mundo visitar a un chico empleado en una fábrica de productos farmacéuticos si tenía alguna razón para hacerlo. Y Hyacinth comprendía que la razón estaba a la vista: era su inmenso interés por los problemas que Muniment conocía muy bien, y sobre todo su amistad común con el hombre extraordinario cuya misión era resolverlos. Más tarde supo que había pronunciado el nombre del poderoso y grande Hoffendahl. Parte del brillo que había en los ojos de Rosy procedía sin duda de la declaración que se había creído obligada a hacer sobre cualquier simpatía que pudiera imputársele hacia esas teorías tan perversas; y claro que el efecto de aquella intensa pero pequeña protesta individual, viniendo del sofá y de la bata rosa, había sido el de siempre: hacer que la casa de los Muniment resultara todavía más original y absurda. A propósito de ese tema, Paul Muniment contestaba siempre con evasivas a todo intento que se hiciera de averiguar su punto de vista; y se habría creído, al oírle, que sólo se permitía tenerlo para sacar de quicio a su hermana y demostrar a los visitantes el ingenio que tenía para combatirlo. Sin embargo, ésa era una de las razones que animaban a la princesa a seguir el rastro. Sin duda no esperaba llegar hasta el fondo de sus ideas en Audley Court y esa oportunidad se presentaría si tenía la amabilidad —con la que seguramente podía contar— de ir a verla y discutirlas en su propia casa.

Hyacinth le habló de la desilusión que había tenido al llegar a South Street, y ella contestó:

—Sí, he dejado esa casa y he cogido otra muy distinta.

Pero no dijo dónde estaba, y a pesar de que él tenía suficientes motivos para esperar que le comunicara algo tan importante para los dos como un cambio de dirección, sentía vergüenza de preguntárselo.

Sus compañeros los contemplaban como si esperaran que de un momento a otro fuera a desvelarse algo más o menos sensacional entre los dos; pero Hyacinth respetaba demasiado lo que le había dado a entender su bella amiga, que no debían dar la impresión de ser íntimos, lo que después de todo era más halagador para él de lo que podían haberlo sido las más inquisitivas preguntas y todas las noticias que pudiera haber dado sobre sí misma. No le preguntó cuándo había vuelto, pero no pasó mucho tiempo antes de que Rose Muniment tomara el asunto por su cuenta. Hyacinth sí se aventuró a asegurarse de que *madame* Grandoni continuaba en su puesto, y hasta se atrevió a decir después de que la princesa contestara: «Sí, sí, allí está. El

gran rechazo, como dice Dante, no ha llegado todavía», quien debía traerla a ver a Rosy, persona que le agradaría especialmente.

—Estoy segura de que me alegraría muchísimo recibir a cualquier amiga de la princesa Casamassima —dijo la muchacha desde el sofá.

Y cuando la princesa contestó que no dejaría de llevar a *madame* Grandoni, Hyacinth, aunque dudaba de que semejante presentación se llevara a cabo algún día, comprendió lo que le hubiera gustado que su vieja amiga pudiera oír decir esas palabras a aquella pobre inválida disfrazada.

No había más que tres asientos, pues la introducción del sofá —cuestión tan debatida de antemano— había hecho necesario eliminar otros muebles, así que Muniment permanecía de pie, y andaba por allí con las manos en los bolsillos sonriendo de buena gana, pero sin mirar a la princesa, aunque Hyacinth veía que no por eso estaba menos nervioso en su presencia.

—Deberías contarnos algo de todos esos países extranjeros y de las grandes cosas que has visto; claro que nuestra distinguida visitante ya sabrá todo lo de ellos —le dijo Muniment. Luego añadió—: De todas maneras, es seguro que no has visto nada tan digno de respeto como Camberwell.

—¿Ésta es la parte peor de todas? —preguntó la princesa con mucho interés.

—¿La peor, señora? ¡Qué ideas tan extraordinarias debe de tener usted! Nosotros admiramos muchísimo Camberwell.

—Las ideas de mi hermano son las raras —dijo Rose Muniment para ponerle en evidencia—. Quiere cambiarlo todo, lo mismo que usted, princesa; pero él es más astuto y no da ninguna pista para que no puedan pescarle. Pone muchas objeciones a toda esta zona, como si la gente sucia no fuera a ensuciar cualquier sitio en donde viva. Me parece que lo que opina es que no debería haber gente sucia, y puede que así sea; sólo que si todo el mundo fuera limpio, ¿qué mérito iba a tener? No ganaría uno ningún crédito por estar aseado. Aparte de eso, todo es cuestión de agua y jabón, y cada uno puede empezar por su cuenta. Mi hermano cree que este barrio tendría que ser tan bonito como Brompton.

—¡Ah, sí!, allí viven los artistas y los escritores, ¿no? —preguntó la princesa.

—Yo no le he visto nunca, pero sé que está muy bien —dijo Rose Muniment, tan enterada como siempre.

—Pues a mí me gusta mucho más Camberwell —comentó su hermano para divertirse.

La princesa se volvió hacia *lady* Aurora, y con aire de pedirle su opinión, recorrió con la mirada desde el último lazo de su sombrero, grande y mal encajado, a las punteras arrugadas de los zapatones que llevaba:

—Tengo que acudir a usted para saber la verdad. Me apetece mucho conocer Londres, el verdadero Londres. ¡Y parece que es muy difícil!

Lady Aurora dio la impresión de estar un poco aterrada, pero contenta al mismo tiempo, y pasado un momento contestó:

—Yo creo que muchos artistas viven en Saint John's Wood.

—No me importan nada los artistas —dijo la princesa meneando la cabeza despacio y con la sonrisa triste que hacía que algunas veces su belleza resultara tan conmovedora.

—¿No le importan cuando le han hecho unos retratos tan bonitos? —preguntó Rosy—. Nosotros conocemos sus retratos y los hemos admirado. El señor Hyacinth nos ha descrito todas sus preciosas posesiones.

La princesa transfirió su sonrisa a la arrugada cara de la chica, y continuó moviendo la cabeza:

—Me hace demasiado honor. Yo no tengo posesiones.

—¡Bueno! ¿Entonces todo eso era invención? —exclamó Rosy, que miró a Hyacinth con unos ojos que nunca resultaban más elocuentes que cuando pedían una explicación.

—¡Yo no tengo nada en el mundo, nada más que la ropa que llevo puesta! —repitió la princesa muy seria y sin mirar a su indiscreta amiga.

Las palabras le sonaron a Hyacinth como una advertencia, y aunque estaba completamente desconcertado no intentó deshacer la contradicción por el momento. Se limitó a contestar:

—Yo me refería a las cosas que había en la casa. Desde luego no sabía a quién pertenecían.

—Ya no hay cosas en mi casa —dijo la princesa, y sus palabras parecían indicar una gran resignación.

—¡Caramba! Pues a mí eso sí que no me gustaría —declaró Rosy, que miraba complacida sus paredes, cubiertas de chismes—. Todo lo que hay aquí me pertenece.

—Ya traeré a *madame* Grandoni para que la vea —dijo la princesa sin que viniera muy a cuento, pero cariñosamente.

—¿Le parece que no está bien tener muchas cosas? —preguntó *lady* Aurora, armándose de valor, apuntando con la barbilla a su distinguida amiga, pero con los ojos puestos en un rincón del techo.

—Supongo que cada uno debe decidirlo por sí mismo. A mí no me gusta rodearme de objetos que no me importan nada, y sólo puede importarme una cosa, bueno una clase de cosas, en cada momento. Querida señora, tengo que confesarle que no estoy por los *bibelots*. Cuando se sabe que hay millares y decenas de millares que no pueden llevarse un pedazo de pan a la boca, puedo pasarme sin tapices y sin porcelanas chinas.

Inclinaba la cara hacia *lady* Aurora, conciliadora, sonriente, como si quisiera decir que si andaba mal de dinero era por lo menos muy honrada.

Hyacinth estaba preguntándose qué nuevo giro habría tomado, y si aquel cuadro de su singular pobreza no sería uno de sus famosos caprichos, alguna broma o una manera de ponerlos a prueba. Oyó que *lady* Aurora preguntaba nerviosa:

—Pero ¿no cree que debíamos hacer que el mundo fuera más hermoso?

—¿No lo hace más hermoso la princesa por el mero hecho de existir? —intervino Hyacinth, que dejó escapar así su perplejidad, sin daño para nadie y con una hipérbole galante.

Había observado que aunque la señora en cuestión pudiera prescindir de los tapices y las porcelanas no podía prescindir de un par de guantes inmaculados que le sentaban estupendamente.

—Mi familia tiene un montón de cosas, ¿sabe?, pero realmente yo no tengo nada —dijo *lady* Aurora, como si le debiera esa aclaración a aquella representante de la humanidad doliente.

—El mundo sería de sobra bonito si fuera bastante bueno —añadió la princesa—. ¿Puede haber algo más feo que las distinciones injustas y los privilegios de unos pocos a costa de la degradación de los demás? Si queremos embellecer las cosas, tenemos que empezar por el principio.

—Pero no hay ninguno de nosotros que no tenga sus privilegios —dijo Rose Muniment, impaciente—. ¿Qué dice usted de los míos, aquí tumbada entre dos miembros de la aristocracia y con el señor Hyacinth además?

—Sí, no cabe duda de que tiene mucha suerte… con *lady* Aurora Langrish. Me gustaría que fuera a verme a *mí* —dijo la princesa con amabilidad al tiempo que se levantaba.

—¡Vaya, *milady*, y dígame si es tan pobre! —exclamó Rosy riéndose.

—Yo creo que nunca hay demasiados cuadros ni estatuas ni obras de arte —intervino Hyacinth—. Cuantos más haya, mejor, y lo mismo si hay gente hambrienta que si no. Si se trata de introducir influencias beneficiosas, ¿no son ésas las más claras?

—Un pedazo de pan con mantequilla sienta mucho mejor si tienes el estómago vacío —declaró la princesa.

—A Robinson le ha corrompido la influencia extranjera —comentó Paul Muniment—. Ya no le importa el pan con mantequilla; ahora está por la cocina francesa.

—Sí, pero no la pruebo. ¿Y ha despedido al hombrecillo, al italiano del mandil y el gorro blanco? —preguntó Hyacinth a la princesa.

Dudó un momento, pero por fin contestó, riéndose, y sin sentirse ofendida por la pregunta, que podía dejarla en mal lugar, y que Hyacinth no había sido capaz de contener en su asombro ante las pretensiones de ascetismo:

—¡Le he despedido muchas veces!

Lady Aurora se había levantado también; y estaba contemplando a su preciosa compañera de visita con una timidez que ponía más de relieve su asombro:

—Sus criados deben de adorarla.

—¡Huy, mis criados! —exclamó la princesa, como si hubiera que ampliar mucho el sentido de la palabra para considerar que disfrutaba de sus servicios.

Al oírla, cualquiera habría pensado que tenía una asistenta que iba sólo una hora al día. Hyacinth comprendió lo que decía, y pensó que si iba a marcharse, como parecía, podía dar por terminada igualmente su visita y acompañarla. Después de pasar tres semanas en Medley se felicitaba de conocerla en todas sus fases, pero aparecía otro campo inexplorado. Ella se volvió hacia Paul Muniment y le tendió la mano para dársela y, mientras él la cogía, su cara recibió el regalo de los ojos más bonitos que la hubieran mirado:

—¿Querría ir a verme un día de estos? —preguntó con una voz tan clara como la mirada.

Hyacinth esperaba la respuesta de Muniment con una emoción que sólo podía achacarse al cariño que le tenía, a la forma en que le había hablado de él a la princesa y que quería justificar, y a su interés por ver que resultaba un chico tan estupendo como él creía. Muniment no vaciló ni se puso colorado; se mantuvo erguido y miró a su interlocutora con unos ojos tan abiertos como los de ella para todo lo que le concerniese. Luego le dijo a modo de respuesta:

—Mire, señora, haga el favor de decirme, ¿de qué iba a servirme?

Y lo dijo con tan buen humor y de una forma tan cariñosa, y tan de acuerdo con su estilo varonil, que aunque no fueran unas palabras muy galantes, Hyacinth no sintió ninguna vergüenza. Al mismo tiempo, observó que *lady* Aurora estaba tan pendiente de su amigo como si tuviera el mismo interés que él en ver lo que iba a decir.

—De nada, claro; quizá me sirviera un poco a mí.

Con esta respuesta, y con una dulzura y una dignidad maravillosas en las que no había sombra de orgullo o de resentimiento, la princesa se apartó de él y se acercó a *lady* Aurora. Le preguntó si tendría la bondad de ir a verla. Le gustaría muchísimo conocerla y creía que tenían muchas cosas de que hablar. *Lady* Aurora dijo que estaría encantada de ir, y la princesa sacó una tarjeta del bolso y se la dio a la aristocrática solterona. Después de entregársela, retuvo un momento su mano y dijo:

—No puede imaginarse lo que me he alegrado de conocerla. Por favor, no lo tome a mal si le digo que la aprecio mucho.

Lady Aurora daba muestras de estar sumamente impresionada y conmovida; pero Rosy, cuando la princesa se despidió de ella, y después de haberle dicho lo que le gustaría recibirla otra vez, no pudo contenerse y dejar de decir la verdad de lo que pensaba sobre todas aquellas teorías:

—Si todo el mundo fuera igual —preguntó Rosy—, ¿qué satisfacción iba a sacar yo de recibir la visita de un grande? Eso es lo que le he dicho muchas veces a su señoría, y creo que he conseguido mantenerla un poco en su sitio. No, no, nada de igualdad mientras yo ande por aquí.

Todos parecían encontrar muy natural que Hyacinth acompañase a la gran señora, y no hicieron ningún esfuerzo por detenerle. La condujo con ayuda de la iluminación auxiliar de Muniment por la oscura escalera y, al llegar a la puerta de la casa, tuvieron otras pocas palabras de despedida, sin que Paul diera señales de ablandarse o retractarse en lo referente a la invitación de la princesa. La noche, que era calurosa, se había puesto sofocante, y los habitantes de Audley Court parecían decididos a pasarla al aire libre. Mientras Hyacinth ayudaba a la princesa a abrirse camino entre grupos de niños sentados en el suelo, mujeres que charlaban con niños al pecho y la cabeza descubierta, y hombres que fumaban unas pipas apestosas, tenía la sensación de que el proyecto de explorar los suburbios estaba ya en marcha. No dijo nada hasta que salieron a la calle; entonces se detuvo un momento y preguntó a la princesa cómo quería que la llevase a casa. ¿La esperaba el coche en algún sitio o quería que buscase uno de alquiler?

—¿Un coche, hijo mío? Pero ¿por quién me tomas? No tienes que molestarte en buscarme un coche: ahora voy a pie a todas partes.

—¿Y si no estuviera yo aquí?

—Me habría ido sola —dijo sonriendo en el turbio anochecer de Camberwell.

—¿Y adonde, si tiene a bien hacerme el favor? Creo que por lo menos puedo tener el honor de acompañarla.

—Desde luego, si puedes llegar tan lejos.

—¿Tan lejos como qué, querida princesa?

—Como Madeira Crescent, Paddington.

—¿Madeira Crescent, Paddington? —dijo Hyacinth asombrado.

—Así es como lo llamo cuando estoy con gente con la que quiero ser fina, como en este caso. Tengo una casita allí.

—¿Entonces es verdad que ha dejado todas sus cosas?

—Lo he vendido todo para dárselo a los pobres.

—¡Ay, princesa…! —el joven soltó casi un gemido; recordaba algunos de los tesoros que tenía.

Ella se puso muy seria, casi enfadada, y en tono de reproche, como si la hubiera herido en lo más vivo, preguntó:

—Cuando dije que deseaba llegar hasta el último sacrificio, ¿creías entonces que estaba mintiendo?

—Pero ¿no se ha quedado con *nada*? —continuó diciendo él sin hacer caso de la pregunta.

Le miró un momento:

—¡Me he quedado contigo!

Hyacinth comprendió lo que había hecho; estaba viviendo en una casita fea y desnuda de clase media y vistiéndose con trajes sencillos; y la energía y buena fe con que actuaba, junto con lo brusco de la transformación, le dejaron sin aliento.

—Creía que iba a gustarte —dijo ella después de haber andado unos cuantos pasos.

Y antes de que tuviera tiempo de contestar, al entrar en la parte de la calle en que había tiendas pequeñas, carnicerías, comestibles y tiendas de salchicheros abiertas, con sus lámparas encendidas y sus

humildes compradores, exclamó entusiasmada:

—¡Así es como me gusta a mí ver Londres!

XXXIII

La casa de Madeira Crescent era un edificio bajo, con la fachada de estuco que formaba un semicírculo pequeño y descuidado, y Hyacinth, al acercarse a ella, pudo ver que la ventana de la sala, al mismo nivel de la puerta de la calle, estaba adornada con una caja de cristal con pájaros disecados y un Cupido de alabastro encima. Conocía Londres lo bastante bien para comprender el bajón que suponía para una persona como ella haberse trasladado a ese barrio después de haber vivido cerca de Park Lane. La calle no era mísera, sino residencial, pero pobre, vulgar y de cuarta clase, y poseía en alto grado esa falta de estilo, ese aire menguado que caracteriza a muchos distritos de Londres, y que Hyacinth había comparado más de una vez con el aspecto de grandiosidad de las perspectivas de París. Tenía todas las condiciones necesarias para resultarle insoportable a la princesa; era casi tan mala como Lomax Place. Al pararse frente a la puerta estrecha y mal pintada, en la que aparecía el número de la casa sobre una placa de porcelana de forma muy caprichosa, el joven pensó que durante su largo paseo había sentido el entusiasmo que llevaba a su compañera a prescindir de todo lo superfluo, pero le parecía al mismo tiempo que establecerse en un plan de filisteísmo vulgar quitaba a su heroísmo todo lo que pudiera tener de romántico. Si lo que se proponía la princesa era mortificar la carne había encontrado el medio más efectivo de hacerlo, y de paso mortificar el espíritu también. La luz de la larga tarde de verano estaba todavía en el aire, y Madeira Crescent tenía un aspecto sucio y polvoriento. Sonaba un organillo frente a una casa vecina, y el carro de la lavandera del barrio tirado por un burro pasaba por el otro lado. Los chiquillos bailaban al son de la música del organillo, y un hombre vestido con un batín sucio y fumando en pipa, que a Hyacinth le hacía pensar en mister Micawber, contemplaba la escena desde una de las ventanas. El joven miró a la princesa antes de entrar en la casa y ella sonrió, como si adivinara los comentarios que no había llegado a pronunciar.

El largo paseo con ella desde la otra punta del sur de Londres había sido extraño y maravilloso; y aunque le parecía imposible, le recordaba algunos de los que había dado en otras tardes de verano con Millicent Henning. La chica y la princesa no podían parecerse menos, pero por su forma de disfrutar de la insólita situación (Hyacinth no tenía noticias de que se hubiera perdido nunca por los barrios bajos, en una tarde de verano y del brazo de un obrero), el personaje distinguido ofrecía ciertas coincidencias con la chica de la tienda. Se paraba, igual que lo hacía Millicent, para mirar los escaparates de las tiendas de poca categoría y se divertía eligiendo los espantosos objetos que le habría gustado poseer; seleccionándolos desde un nuevo punto de vista, el de su fortuna reducida y el de las economías de una ama de casa de la «clase media baja», y sacando el mayor partido posible a la idea de pertenecer a ese estamento tan agraviado. Tenía un regocijo social recién estrenado que Hyacinth no había visto nunca en ella y, antes de que llegaran a Madeira Crescent, Hyacinth había comprendido que aquella nueva fase era poco más que un *tour de force* que no creía fuese a durar mucho tiempo, por la sencilla razón de que en cuanto hubieran pasado la novedad y la extravagancia del asunto sería incapaz de aguantar el contacto con todo lo que era vulgar y feo. Mas por el momento sus descubrimientos en ese terreno la divertían tanto como todos los otros, y pretendía estar haciendo la prueba con espíritu científico —con el de un filósofo sociológico o el de un estudioso y crítico de costumbres— de las profundidades del filisteísmo británico. A Hyacinth le asombró más que nunca la cantidad de vida que había en ella, la energía de sus sentimientos y el espíritu libre e intrépido que tenía. Todas esas cosas iban manifestándose, mientras andaban, por un centenar de observaciones y de proposiciones descabelladas, que enardecían al chico y le hacían darse cuenta de que sería feliz siguiéndola hasta la muerte en cualquier extravagancia. Le parecía que en aquellos momentos jugaba con la vida de una forma tan audaz y desafiante que el final, inevitablemente, sería una catástrofe.

Tenía unas ganas tremendas de que Hyacinth la llevase a un *music-hall* o a un café; hasta decía que sentía curiosidad por ver el interior de una taberna. Como conservaba el suficiente sentido para recordar que, si volvía muy tarde, *madame* Grandoni empezaría a inquietarse, tuvieron que contentarse con lo que la

princesa calificó de «esparcimiento» menor, meter un poco la nariz en un establecimiento que relumbraba de cacharrería y latón, y que llevaba por nombre La Tierra Feliz. Él temía que se pusiera nerviosa en cuanto la puerta estrecha y mugrienta se cerrara tras ellos, o que se disgustara por lo que podía ver u oír en semejante sitio, y quisiera marcharse. Por suerte, no había más que tres o cuatro juerguistas en el local, y la presencia del sexo débil no parecía tan rara como para causar sorpresa. El sexo débil estaba representado por una mujer fuerte y colorada, la mujer del dueño, que parecía acostumbrada a tratar con toda clase de gente, y daba muestras de preocuparse, sobre todo, de comprobar que hasta los más finolis depositaran su dinero antes de que los sirvieran. La princesa fingió «tomar algo» y admirar la ornamentación del bar; y cuando Hyacinth le preguntó en voz baja qué podrían hacer el día en que llegaran los grandes cambios con un tipo tan incómodo como aquella señora, contestó sin dudarlo: «Ahogarla en un barril de cerveza».

Al salir, declaró que La Tierra Feliz le había interesado mucho, y no quedó contenta hasta hacerle prometer a Hyacinth que una noche irían juntos a un *music-hall*. Habló mucho con él, aunque siempre a saltos, de sus aventuras en el extranjero y de sus impresiones de Francia e Italia; cortándole de repente con cualquier comentario extravagante sobre Rose Muniment y *lady* Aurora, y volviendo luego al tema con alguna pregunta sobre lo que había visto y hecho aunque en muchos casos no se molestara en esperar la respuesta. Sin embargo, debía de haber prestado bastante atención a lo que le había contado, cuando poco antes de llegar a casa y con aquella franqueza suya tan conmovedora, pues parecía dejarla a merced de uno y demostrar que esperaba le correspondieran con la misma lealtad, comentó:

—Bueno, amigo mío, no has perdido el tiempo; lo sabes todo y no se te ha escapado nada; puedes contarme un montón de cosas, así es que este invierno tendremos grandes charlas por las noches.

Esas palabras parecían referirse a la estación siguiente, y el tono amistoso en que las dijo encerraba tantas cosas atrayentes que Hyacinth se sintió aún más ligado a ella. Vivir así, fuera del mundo, perdido entre los millones de personas que había en Londres, y en un extraño refugio medio *cockney*, era un refinamiento de intimidad del que podían salir revelaciones que superaran a las que le habían dejado boquiabierto en Medley.

Encontraron a *madame* Grandoni sentada sola a la luz del crepúsculo, muy tranquila, y con muestras de haber aceptado la situación tan completamente como para no darle importancia a cosas de tan poca monta como que su compañera no volviera a casa a la hora en que debía hacerlo una señora. Se había sentado en la parte de atrás del saloncito cursi, que daba a un jardincillo descuidado, y por la abierta ventana llegaba hasta ella con la oscuridad de la noche la algarabía de los niños que se divertían con la música. La presencia de Londres se notaba en un murmullo mitigado y lejano y, sin saber muy bien por qué, al joven le pareció aquella la casa de un exiliado, un lugar y una hora que habrían de recordarse con cariño en momentos de peligro o de dolor que pudieran llegar más tarde. La señora no se movió de la silla al ver entrar a la princesa con el encuadernador, y le miró con tanta naturalidad como si le hubiera visto salir con ella por la tarde. La princesa sonrió un momento a su paciente compañera:

—Hoy he hecho una cosa de las grandes. ¿Qué te imaginas que he hecho? —preguntó mientras se quitaba los guantes.

—¡Sabe Dios! Ya he dejado de imaginarme. —Y *madame* Grandoni alzó los ojos hacia ella, con sus regordetas manos apoyadas en los brazos del sillón.

—He venido a pie desde la otra punta de Londres. ¿Cuántas millas?, cuatro o cinco… y no me he cansado lo más mínimo.

—*Che forza, che forza!* —suspiró la señora—. Te va a dejar fuera de combate —dijo luego, dirigiéndose a Hyacinth con la compasión acostumbrada.

—¡Pobrecilla! Ha perdido el coche —comentó Christina, al tiempo que salía de la habitación.

Los ojos de *madame* Grandoni la siguieron, y Hyacinth vio en ellos un gran cansancio, un asombro triste y resignado.

—¿No le gusta ir en coche… quiero decir en coches de alquiler? —preguntó Hyacinth, con deseos de ayudarle y disimular.

—No es verdad que haya perdido nada; mi vida lo que está es demasiado llena. He vivido peor que ahora en mis malos tiempos. Se ha ido porque estás tú aquí, y no quiere que venga Assunta.

—¿Assunta… porque estoy yo aquí? —preguntó Hyacinth, que no entendía una palabra.

—Ya habrás visto a su doncella italiana en Medley. Se ha quedado con ella, y le da vergüenza. Cuando estamos solas, Assunta viene a cogerle el sombrero y las otras cosas. Pero quiere que creas que lo hace todo sola.

—Eso es una debilidad, y en cambio ella es muy fuerte. ¿Y qué piensa Assunta? —dijo Hyacinth, que no quitaba ojo a los pájaros disecados de la ventana, al Cupido de alabastro, las flores de cera de la chimenea,

los macasares floridos de las sillas, los grabados sentimentales colgados de las paredes —con marcos de *papier-mâché*, y algunos envueltos en papel de seda rosa—, y los prismas de cristal que colgaban de todas partes.

—Pues ella dice: «¿Qué puede importar el día de mañana?».

—¿Quiere decir que la princesa volvería a vivir con lujo el día de mañana? ¿No ha vendido todas las cosas?

Madame Grandoni hizo una mueca:

—Se ha quedado con unas cuantas. Pero están retiradas.

—*À la bonne heure!* —exclamó Hyacinth con una carcajada.

Se sentó junto a *madame* Grandoni, y estuvo casi media hora hablando con ella de unas cosas y otras, antes de que les trajeran unas velas y mientras la princesa estaba en manos de Assunta. Comprobó con cuánta resolución había evitado la princesa suavizar la dosis que estaba empeñada en tragar, mitigar un poco la fealdad de su casita. Había respetado todos sus horrendos toques y detalles, y no había quitado ni una sola cursilería de las que privaban en Madeira Crescent. No había cubierto los muebles ni había puesto alfombras sobre la estera chillona, y era evidente que en su opinión la mejor forma de conocer las sensaciones de los desventurados era padecer su irritante mal gusto. Una criada, que no era la escéptica Assunta, sino una chica joven y robusta con aire de criada para todo, la misma que les había abierto la puerta poco antes, entró en el salón y dijo que la princesa esperaba que se quedase con ellas a tomar el té. Supo por *madame* Grandoni que la costumbre de hacer una comida temprana, seguida de una frugal refacción por la noche, propia de las clases bajas, era otra de las mortificaciones de Christina; cuando poco después vio la mesa puesta en el salón de atrás, que servía al mismo tiempo de comedor, y se fijó en la vajilla con que estaba adornada, comprendió que durara o no el empeño, no cabía duda de que le había dado muy fuerte. *Madame* Grandoni acabó de aclararle lo que la princesa sólo le había contado a retazos; es decir, lo que habían hecho desde que marcharon de Medley, el abandono de su hermosa casa y los súbitos arreglos que Christina había hecho para cambiar su forma de vida cuando llevaban sólo diez días en South Street. En plena temporada de Londres, y en medio de una sociedad que no deseaba más que considerarla como uno de sus más preciados ornamentos, se había marchado a Madeira Crescent, ocultando su dirección —sin pleno éxito por supuesto— y llamando a un famoso chamarilero para que viera sus *bibelots* y le dijera lo que podía dar por ellos. De esa forma, se había desprendido de ellos a costa de un gran sacrificio. Había querido evitar la sensación de nueve días de subasta pública; porque, para hacerle justicia, aunque le gustara ser original, no le gustaba llamar la atención ni dar lugar a habladurías. Lo que había precipitado su decisión de dar un paso tan violento había sido la reprimenda que recibió de su marido, nada más volver de Medley, por los gastos excesivos que hacía: le había escrito diciendo que la cosa pasaba de broma, según ella creía, y que debía empezar a tirar de la cuerda. No había nada que pudiera molestarle más que una alusión a ese tema, pues aseguraba conocer perfectamente la renta de que disfrutaba su marido, y que lo que le daba a ella era una parte insignificante; en cualquier caso, y como Hyacinth podía ver, había tirado de la cuerda con auténticos deseos de venganza. El joven adivinó en aquel momento uno de los motivos de angustia de su amiga, en el que nunca había pensado antes: el peligro de que el príncipe apretara definitivamente los tornillos, que intentara obligarla a vivir otra vez con él retirándole toda subvención. En ese caso iba a verse muy apurada, aunque ella tenía la teoría de que si acudía a los tribunales le concederían una pensión por separado. Claro que estaba poco de acuerdo con su carácter el seguir ese sistema; era más probable que renunciara a su derecho y se ganara la vida dando lecciones de música o de idiomas y acudiendo a lo que quedara de lo que le había dejado su madre. Que volviera algún día a vivir con el príncipe por no atreverse a arrostrar la pérdida de sus lujos era algo que no se le pasaba por la cabeza a Hyacinth, en medio de tantas seguridades como le había dado de suspirar por hacer un sacrificio; y al oír contar a *madame* Grandoni cómo había sido la ruptura de su amiga con el mundo elegante, lo temía menos que nunca. Pero la pobre señora comentó con un profundo suspiro que no sabía cómo acabaría aquello, pues algunas de las economías de Christina salían carísimas; y al presionarle un poco Hyacinth para saber algo más, dijo que de momento no eran las complicaciones que pudieran venir del príncipe las que más le preocupaban, sino el miedo de que su mujer se viera seriamente comprometida por la insensata correspondencia que mantenía: cartas que llegaban de países extranjeros y de Dios sabía quién (Christina nunca lo decía ni ella deseaba saberlo), y que no hablaban más que de levantamientos, manifestaciones y liberaciones —de eso sí estaba segura— y de otros asuntos que no tenían nada que ver con las personas decentes. Hyacinth entendió sólo a medias lo que quería decir *madame* Grandoni, pero supuso que en los últimos meses la princesa había extendido mucho sus relaciones revolucionarias; él pensaba en Hoffendahl, aunque tuvo buen cuidado de no pronunciar su nombre y se preguntaba si la princesa no habría escrito al

maestro para interceder por *él*, para rogarle que no le empleara. La cara le ardía sólo de pensarlo, pero se limitó a hacer observar a *madame* Grandoni que su extraordinaria amiga disfrutaba con la sensación del peligro. Ella dijo que le gustaría saber si iba a disfrutar también con la cuerda del verdugo que, *du train dont elle allait*, no era difícil que llegase a conocer, y, al expresar él la esperanza de que no creyese que era quien le animaba a ser imprudente, contestó:

—¿Tú, pobrecillo? A ti ya te calé en Medley. Tú no eres más que un *codino*.

La princesa volvió para tomar el té con un vestido muy feo y un manojo de llaves en la cintura; y nada podía dar mejor la impresión de que era una ama de casa ahorrativa que su forma de vigilar cómo se ponía el mantel y se colocaba encima un refrigerio de lo más austero: unas tostadas de pan con mantequilla, acompañadas de un bote de mermelada de naranja y una lonja de *bacon*. Llenó la tetera, después de sacar con mucha dificultad una lata brillante del armario, e hizo el té con sus propias manos; esforzándose, eso sí, en explicar a Hyacinth que no pretendía imponer ese régimen a *madame* Grandoni, que podía encargar al tendero cualquier exquisitez que deseara para su consumo privado. Ella, por su parte, no se había sentido nunca tan bien como con aquella dieta casera. Los domingos tomaban *muffins*, y algunas veces, para cambiar, pescado ahumado o lenguado frito. Hyacinth se deshizo en elogios ante las condiciones de ama de casa de la princesa y de lo maravillosa que resultaba en su papel de pequeña burguesa; pensando que si su intento de combinar la vida vulgar con los altos pensamientos no era más que una burla, estaba proporcionándole al menos un gran entretenimiento. Ella le habló a *madame* Grandoni de *lady* Aurora; la describió con muy buen humor hasta en los detalles del vestido; declaró que era una criatura encantadora y una de las personas más interesantes que había visto desde hacía mucho tiempo; y le dijo a Hyacinth que estaba convencida de que iba a gustarle muchísimo si llegaba a creer un poco en *ella*.

—Pero a mí me gustará, le guste yo a ella o no. Sé perfectamente cuándo ocurrirá eso: no es tan corriente. Empezará muy bien, y se sentirá «fascinada» (¿no es así como todos empiezan conmigo?), pero no me entenderá ni habrá manera de que llegue a comprender qué clase de pez soy, por mucho que me esfuerce en aclararlo. Cuando crea por fin que ya me entiende, se apartara de mí disgustada y no comprenderá nunca que todo lo ha entendido al revés. Eso ha pasado con casi todas las personas que me gustaban; han escapado de mí *à toutes jambes*. ¡Sí, he inspirado verdaderos odios! —exclamó divertidísima, al tiempo que le daba a Hyacinth una taza de té.

Por el aroma que desprendía, comprendió que la mezcla no era inferior a la que ya había probado en Medley.

—Jamás he conseguido llegar a conocer a alguien que pudiera resultarme beneficioso, porque en cuanto empezaba a mejorar bajo su influencia, no podían aguantarme más tiempo.

—Me dijiste que ibas a visitar a los pobres. No comprendo qué es lo que estaba haciendo allí tu condesa —dijo *madame* Grandoni.

—Ella también iba por caridad, igual que yo. No cabe duda de que sabe mucho de eso; tengo que insistir para que me lleve con ella.

—Yo creía que me había prometido ser su guía en ese tipo de exploraciones —dijo Hyacinth en seguida.

La princesa le miró:

—Querido señor Robinson, *lady* Aurora sabe más que usted.

—Pues en otros tiempos me ha felicitado a veces por lo mucho que sabía.

—Quiero decir más de las clases bajas.

Por raro que pareciera, Hyacinth no podía negar que su señoría sabía más que él en cierto sentido, y se refirió a lo que la princesa había dicho antes, comentando que ni él ni *madame* Grandoni habían obrado de esa manera y que no habían salido corriendo.

—¡Huy, todo llegará! No tengas miedo.

—Creo que si hubiera sido capaz de dejarte ya lo habría hecho: he desperdiciado grandes oportunidades —comentó *madame* Grandoni con un suspiro.

Hyacinth se dio cuenta de que sus ojos habían perdido el buen humor de antaño; estaba preocupada por muchas cosas.

——Claro que si no me dejaste cuando era rica, no quedarías muy bien si me dejaras ahora —contestó la princesa y, antes de que *madame* Grandoni pudiera replicar, le dijo a Hyacinth:

—Me gustó mucho ese hombre tan raro, tu amigo Muniment, por decir que no quería venir a verme (¿«De qué iba a servirle», pobre chico?). Realmente, ¿de qué iba a servirle? Tú no pusiste tantas dificultades: al principio te echaste un poco atrás e inventaste que había varios obstáculos, pero era notorio que vendrías —añadió envolviéndole en su desconcertante sonrisa—. Aparte de eso entonces era más elegante, más sensacional; llevaba muchas cosas encima y daba la impresión de tener otros artificios

mundanos. Tenía que resultar más atractiva. Pero me gustó por negarse —repitió.

De las muchas cosas que dijo aquella tarde fueron esas palabras las que más impresionaron a Hyacinth. Se quedó todavía una hora más, porque al levantarse de la mesa la princesa se dirigió al piano —no había prescindido de ese recurso y tenía un instrumento pequeño, de los llamados *cottage*—, y empezó a tocar como lo había hecho en el día inolvidable de su llegada a Medley. Era ya de noche, y como el piano estaba en la habitación delantera abrió a petición suya la ventana que daba a Madeira Crescent. Los chicos y chicas que habían estado bailando al son del organillo una hora antes se reunieron al pie de la ventana. Pero en lugar de juguetear por allí estaban en silencio, apoyados en la barandilla que había delante de la casa, y escuchando maravillados la música. Cuando Hyacinth dijo a la pianista que los había hechizado, ella declaró que se alegraba muchísimo, y que estaba no sólo contenta, sino casi orgullosa del día que había pasado. Tenía la sensación de haber empezado a hacer algo por el pueblo. Poco antes de despedirse volvió a encontrar ocasión de decir que estaba segura de que ese hombre tan raro de Audley Court no iría a verla; y él no se molestó en contradecirle, porque estaba convencido de que no lo haría.

XXXIV

Cuánta razón tenía la princesa al pensar que *lady* Aurora quedaría fascinada en el primer momento se demostró tan pronto como Hyacinth fue a Belgrave Square, una visita que se consideraba obligado a hacer por lo bien que se había portado su señoría cuando la muerte de Pinnie. La encontró en las mismas condiciones en que la había encontrado en su visita del año anterior; estaba pasando aquella temporada considerada tan poco elegante en la vacía casa de su padre, entre muebles enfundados y ecos de conversaciones desvanecidas. La había visto tanto durante la enfermedad de Pinnie, que tenía la sensación —o la había tenido entonces— de que la conocía casi íntimamente, de que se habían hecho verdaderos amigos, casi camaradas, y que podía ir a verla sin reserva ni ceremonia alguna. A pesar de todo, se mostró tan espantada y perdida como la primera vez: no distante, pero sí hecha un lío entre roda suerte de timideces, y sin darse cuenta, al parecer, de qué era lo que podía haber sucedido para acercar el uno al otro. A Hyacinth, sin embargo, siempre le gustaba estar con ella, porque no había otra persona en el mundo que le tratara con tanta delicadeza y tanta naturalidad como si fuera un señor, y como si no pusiera en duda que lo era. No se había permitido nunca las libertades aduladoras y agradables que había escuchado de labios de la princesa, y no le había dicho nunca lo que pensaba de él; pero su timidez abierta, que daba toda igualdad por algo absolutamente natural, era un homenaje a la idea que él tenía de su buena condición. Fue así como conversó con él de sus viajes por el extranjero, y cómo Hyacinth se encontró discutiendo en Belgravia, igual que cualquier cosmopolita criado entre esos lujos, las directrices políticas de París y las teorías de Ruskin sobre Venecia. Claro que tampoco tardó mucho tiempo en darse cuenta de que a *lady* Aurora le importaban poco todas esas cosas; la sonrisa deferente con que le escuchaba, con la cabeza inclinada hacia adelante y con sus largas manos cruzadas sobre el regazo, era más bien mecánica, y toda su actitud puramente de cumplido. Cuando le dio su opinión sobre algunas de las *arrière-pensées* del señor Gambetta —porque estaba convencido de que no carecía de originalidad—, no le interrumpió, porque no interrumpía nunca a nadie, pero aprovechó la primera pausa para preguntar aunque no fuera de eso de lo que estaban hablando:

—¿Volverá la princesa Casamassima a Audley Court?

—No me cabe duda de que irá si les gusta que lo haga.

—Espero que vaya. Es realmente maravillosa —dijo *lady* Aurora con entusiasmo.

—Sí es maravillosa. Creo que a Rosy le dio una gran alegría.

—Rosy no sabe hablar de otra cosa. Sería un gran bien para ella que pudiera repetirse la experiencia. ¿No le parece que es completamente distinta a todas las personas que uno ha conocido? —Pero su señoría, sin esperar la respuesta, añadió—: A mí me gustó de un modo extraordinario.

—Pues usted le gustó lo mismo a ella. Sé que tendría una gran alegría si fuera a verla —dijo Hyacinth.

—¡Qué sorpresa! —exclamó su señoría.

Y le pidió en seguida su dirección, que anotó en un cuadernillo algo desastrado. Comentó que la tarjeta que le había dado la princesa en Camberwell no tenía dirección, y Hyacinth justificó tan extraño detalle diciendo que era muy descuidada. Luego le preguntó con cierta vacilación:

—¿Le importan realmente los pobres?

—Si no le importaran —contestó el chico—, no comprendo qué interés puede tener en simularlo.

—Pues si le importan, es un caso muy especial… Merece todos los honores.

—A usted sí que le importan. ¿Por qué va a ser ella entonces un caso más especial? —preguntó Hyacinth.

—¡Huy, es muy distinto! Ella es una mujer muy atractiva.

Ésa fue la única alusión a su propio aspecto que Hyacinth iba a oírle hacer en su vida. Se dio cuenta en seguida, y añadió para borrar esa impresión:

—Me gustaría hablar con ella, pero tengo miedo. Es terriblemente lista.

—Lo que es «terriblemente» ya lo verá en cuanto la conozca —se le escapó decir a Hyacinth.

Su señoría le miró, y exclamó con cierta vaguedad:

—¡Qué interesante! —Después añadió—: Podría hacer muchas cosas. Podría entusiasmar al mundo.

—Le entusiasma haga lo que haga —sonrió Hyacinth—. Todo va unido, y son cosas que no se estorban.

—Eso es lo que quiero decir: que habría mucha gente que estaría encantada… con lo guapa que es. Tiene mucho mérito dejar alguna cosa.

—Ha conocido mucha gente mala y ahora quiere conocer a algunos buenos. Por eso no lo dude, y vaya a verla pronto.

—Pues da la impresión de no haber conocido nada malo desde el día en que nació —dijo *lady* Aurora, entusiasmada—. No puedo imaginármela yendo a todos esos sitios tan espantosos adonde tendrá que ir.

—Usted también ha ido y no le han hecho ningún daño.

—¿Y cómo lo sabe? Mi familia cree que sí me lo han hecho.

—Pues entonces me alegro de no tener familia —dijo Hyacinth.

—¿Y la princesa… tiene familia?

—Sí, tiene a su marido. Pero no vive con él.

—¿Es uno de los malos? —preguntó *lady* Aurora con el mismo interés que un niño que estuviera escuchando un cuento.

—Bueno, no me gusta hablar mal de él, es un hombre vencido.

—Si yo fuera hombre, me enamoraría de ella —declaró *lady* Aurora—. Me gustaría saber si podríamos trabajar juntas.

—Eso es precisamente lo que ella espera.

—Pero yo no voy a enseñarle los peores sitios —comentó con aire malicioso *lady* Aurora.

—Espero que haga lo que han hecho todos los demás… que es precisamente lo que ella quiere —respondió Hyacinth.

Antes de despedirse de ella, le preguntó:

—¿Sabe si a Paul Muniment le gustó también la princesa?

Su señoría lo pensó mucho antes de contestar:

—Yo creo que sobre todo la encontró extraordinariamente guapa, la persona más guapa que había visto en su vida.

—¿Y sigue creyendo que es una farsante?

—¿Sigue…? —preguntó *lady* Aurora como si no le entendiera.

—Ésa parecía ser la impresión que le hizo cuando le hablé de ella el invierno pasado.

—¡Ay!, estoy segura de que la considera una mujer de muchos arranques.

Y eso fue todo lo que consiguió saber Hyacinth de lo que a Muniment le había parecido la princesa.

Pocos días después volvió a Madeira Crescent por la tarde, única hora que tenía libre, pues la princesa le había invitado a tomar el té con ella, con cierta regularidad. Le parecía que debía ser discreto, pero no le faltaban tampoco razones para ir con frecuencia y temprano. Tenía un miedo especial a que se cansara de él y llegara a aburrirse en su compañía; pero al mismo tiempo le parecía que debía aburrirse también sin él en aquellas largas tardes de verano, en las que hasta los que vivían en Paddington se marchaban de Londres. Quería saber qué hacía, quiénes la visitaban, cómo se entretenía y qué era lo que podía impedir que mandara de repente a paseo todo el asunto en que andaba metida. Recordaba que había una parte de su vida casi desconocida para él —*lady* Marchant y sus hijas, y tres o cuatro personas más que habían aparecido por Medley eran su única referencia— y no sabía hasta qué punto conservaba sus antiguas amistades a pesar de tan gran transformación; veía alzarse como una amenaza el día en que se diera cuenta de que lo que había encontrado en Madeira Crescent era menos notable que lo que había dejado. Pero al volver allí por segunda vez vio que había sido injusto con ella: tenía multitud de recursos y no había sido nunca tan feliz; encontraba tiempo para leer, escribir, tocar el piano y, sobre todo, tenía tiempo para pensar y sentirse muy a gusto, desligada de toda la tontería del mundo que había conocido hasta entonces. Lo único que interrumpía su felicidad eran las muchas notas que recibía de sus antiguas amistades, las constantes llamadas para que diera alguna razón de sí, dijera qué había sido de su vida, y fuera a pasar unos días con ellos en el campo. Con esas supervivencias de su pasado adoptó una decisión tajante: quemar las cartas sin contestarlas. Nada más llegar Hyacinth, le dijo que *lady* Aurora había ido a verla dos días antes, que no la había encontrado en casa y que le había mandado recado inmediatamente para que fuera a tomar el té cualquier día a las ocho de la tarde. Así era como se trataba la gente en Madeira Crescent —la princesa estaba ya enterada de todo e impaciente por comunicar sus conocimientos—, y además suponía

que para *lady* Aurora las ocho de la tarde era una hora mucho mejor, ya que se pasaba el día dedicada a sus buenas obras y a sus peregrinaciones de caridad. Su señoría llegó diez minutos más tarde que Hyacinth; le aseguró a la princesa que su invitación había sido hecha de una forma tan halagadora para ella, que no había querido esperar más de un día para responder. Fue presentada a *madame* Grandoni, y el té se sirvió en seguida con todos los honores, mientras Hyacinth se sentía muy agradecido por la forma «considerada» en que *lady* Aurora evitó asombrarse de encontrarle allí. Sabía que iba con frecuencia, y había sido testigo de su encuentro con la princesa en Audley Court; pero podía asustarse al comprobar por sí misma la confianza de que disfrutaba. Todo lo que dijo o hizo la princesa, y fuera el que fuera su propósito, tuvo el mismo efecto: dar la impresión de que era aún más singular y agradable; y pocas veces había disfrutado tanto Hyacinth al ver el arte con que se ganaba la confianza de *lady* Aurora y se ponía bajo la influencia pura y ennoblecedora de la aristocrática solterona. Supo hacerse pequeña y sencilla; habló de sus esfuerzos y aspiraciones; acertó a pedir consejo y convencer; y puso su mano sobre la de su invitada, mirándola con un interés totalmente sincero, pero que hacía mucho más efecto por el contraste que ofrecían su belleza y toda su persona con los horribles problemas de la miseria y el crimen. Fue emocionante y *lady* Aurora se conmovió; saltaba a la vista al verlas sentadas en el sofá y oír a la princesa que lo único que quería saber era qué hacía su amiga —qué había estado haciendo durante años— para hacer ella lo mismo. Hacía preguntas personales tan directas —Hyacinth desde el primer día había visto que tenía esa costumbre— que a veces resultaban embarazosas, y su anhelante invitada, aunque encantada y con una gran excitación, no acababa de sentirse a gusto al verse sondeada y puesta a prueba en público. El público lo formaban *madame* Grandoni y Hyacinth; pero la señora, cuya comunicación con la visita había consistido casi exclusivamente en mirarla con mucha curiosidad, se levantó y se fue y, como los tabiques que se usaban en Madeira Crescent eran muy delgados, se notó que iba a su habitación. A Hyacinth le pareció que por delicadeza debía marcharse también, y estaba dispuesto a hacerlo de un momento a otro. *Lady* Aurora ya le había dicho de sí misma —y a la segunda vez de estar con ella— todo lo que podía esperar que le dijera. Después de aquel fugaz relámpago de egotismo, no había vuelto a oírla hablar de sus sentimientos o sus condiciones.

—¿Y se queda así, en la ciudad, durante esta época de verano, para atender a su trabajo? —preguntó la princesa.

Había cierto desengaño en el tono con que hizo la pregunta, como si le apenara un poco ver que la que ella había hecho no era tan original como había supuesto.

—El señor Robinson me ha hablado de la gran casa que usted tiene en Belgrave Square; tiene que permitirme que vaya a verla allí. Nada podría alegrarme tanto como que me permitiera ayudarla un poco… por poco que fuera. ¿Le gusta que la ayuden, o prefiere hacer las cosas sola? ¿Es usted independiente o necesita acudir a otro, apoyarse en alguien? Perdone si le hago preguntas impertinentes; en Roma, donde he pasado la mayor parte de mi vida, más bien tenemos la costumbre de hablar así. La idea de que está sola, en esa casa tan grande y tan aburrida, me impresiona; me parece algo extraño y emocionante, como si se tratara de una novela inglesa. Las mujeres inglesas son muy completas, ¿no? Yo, realmente, soy extranjera y, aunque he vivido aquí, ya sabe que le supone a una cierto tiempo llegar a comprender esas cosas *au juste*. ¿Entonces su labor con el pueblo es sólo una de sus ocupaciones o lo es todo, algo que le absorbe completamente? Eso me gustaría a mí. ¿A su familia le parece bien que se dedique a todo esto con tanto ardor o ha tenido que desafiar algún ridículo? Me atrevería a decir que ha tenido que hacerlo; pero ése es el fuerte de los ingleses; desafiar el ridículo. Lo han hecho muchas veces, ¿no es verdad? No sé si yo sería capaz de hacerlo. No lo he intentado nunca… pero creo que con usted me atrevería a desafiar cualquier cosa. ¿Su familia es inteligente y agradable? ¿No, lo que suelen ser las familias? Bueno, tenemos que formar nosotras una pequeña familia. ¿Y lo hace usted porque sí o tiene alguna fe, alguna gran idea que la anime? ¿Es muy religiosa, *par exemple*? ¿Trabaja en conexión con alguna fundación piadosa, algún movimiento, cualquier misión o curas o hermanas? Yo soy católica, ¿sabe?, pero la verdad es que no lo parezco. No tendría inconveniente en unirme a cualquiera que estuviera haciendo algo verdaderamente útil. No me expreso muy bien, pero creo entenderá lo que quiero decir. Acaso ignore que soy una de esas personas que suponen factibles grandes cambios y que las cosas no podrán ir peor de lo que están. En una palabra, creo en la acción del pueblo por sí mismo, pues no hay que esperar que los otros lo hagan por ellos; y estoy dispuesta a actuar *con* ellos, siempre que sea de una forma inteligente o inteligible. Si le extraña, me llevaré una tremenda desilusión, porque hay algo en la impresión que me hizo, que me dice que no tiene los prejuicios corrientes, y que no se asustaría si ciertas cosas sucedieran. Es bastante tímida, ¿no?, pero no cobarde. Me imagino que si pensase que la desigualdad, la opresión y la miseria, que son universales, constituyeran parte esencial de la vida y duraran siempre, no le interesarían personas como esas que viven al otro lado del río (esa chica inválida y su hermano); porque Hyacinth me ha dicho que son socialistas y de

ideas muy avanzadas, al menos el hermano. Quizá pueda decirme que no es él quien le importa, y que en su opinión la más extraordinaria es la chica. Verdad que ella es una perfecta *femme du monde*, y habla mucho mejor que muchos de la alta sociedad. Espero que no le importe que diga esto, porque me da la impresión de que no pertenece a la sociedad. ¡Ya puede imaginarse si perteneceré a ella yo! ¿No la ha juzgado igual que yo y ha decidido abandonarla? ¿No le pone mala la egolatría, la estupidez, la mezquindad, la hipocresía, la frivolidad y la inmoralidad que tiene? ¿Y no le parece que nuestra situación es muy semejante? No me refiero a nuestro modo de ser, porque es usted mucho mejor de lo que yo voy a ser en mi vida. Porque usted es extraordinariamente buena, ¿no? Cuando veo a una mujer así (y no las veo muchas veces), intento ser menos mala. Usted ha ayudado a cientos, a miles de personas: ¡tiene que ayudarme a mí!

Naturalmente, todas estas preguntas que he puesto juntas, no salieron de los labios de la princesa como si se tratara de una corriente ininterrumpida; se vieron cortadas por frecuentes respuestas inarticuladas y por numerosas protestas. *Lady* Aurora se encogía ante ellas aunque le fueran muy favorables, hacía guiños y se movía nerviosa bajo el enfoque directo de la deslumbrante simpatía de la princesa. No necesito repetir sus contestaciones, sobre todo teniendo en cuenta que la mayoría no llegaron a completarse, sino que se deshicieron en risas nerviosas, en miradas desviadas y dirigidas al techo, al suelo, a las ventanas, como dirigidas a algún poder superior y oculto, capaz de interceder por ella y de hacer que la conversación se volviera un poco más impersonal. En respuesta a la alusión de la princesa a las convicciones de la familia Muniment, dijo que el hermano y la hermana no tenían las mismas ideas sobre las cuestiones públicas, pero que estaban de acuerdo en lo que se refería a las personas de clase alta que se interesaban por los trabajadores, que intentaban meterse en su vida: lo consideraban un completo error.

Al oír esas noticias, la princesa se mostró desilusionada; quería saber si los Muniment consideraban imposible que les hicieran bien alguno.

—¡No!, quiero decir un error desde *nuestro* punto de vista —dijo *lady* Aurora—. Que ellos en nuestro lugar no lo harían; les parece que haríamos mejor ocupándonos de nuestras propias diversiones.

Al ver que su nueva amiga miraba asombrada sin acabar de comprender, añadió:

—Rosy cree que tenemos derecho a pasarlo bien en cualquier circunstancia, y por muy mal que lo pasen los pobres; y su hermano opina que como es probable que no disfrutemos de esa ventaja mucho tiempo, somos unos verdaderos idiotas si no nos aprovechamos de ella.

—Comprendo, comprendo. Es una cosa muy seria —murmuró la princesa, como si le preocupara mucho.

—A mí también me lo parece. Pero creo que, venga lo que venga, uno *tiene* que hacer algo.

—¿Entonces cree usted que va a pasar algo?

—Sí, yo diría que habrá unos cambios inmensos. Pero no pertenezco a nada, ¿sabe?

La princesa lo pensó mucho antes de contestar:

—Yo tampoco. Pero hay mucha gente que sí; como el señor Robinson, por ejemplo.

Dirigió su preciosa mirada a Hyacinth, que se puso muy colorado y exclamó:

—¡Uf! Como los cambios dependan de mí…

Lady Aurora adoptó la postura de no considerarse con derecho a intervenir en los asuntos de Hyacinth; miró vagamente hacia el piano y le dijo a la princesa:

—Estoy segura de que toca estupendamente. Me gustaría mucho oírla.

Hyacinth comprendió que a su amiga aquello le parecía *banal*. No había invitado a *lady* Aurora a pasar la tarde con ella para volver otra vez a las mismas tonterías de siempre. A pesar de todo, contestó que tendría mucho gusto en tocar, pero que había algo que le gustaría mucho más: que *lady* Aurora le contase su vida.

—¡No hable de la mía, por favor; de la suya, de la suya! —exclamó *lady* Aurora muy nerviosa, y permitiéndose por primera vez desde su llegada la libertad de poner su mano sobre la de la princesa.

—Con tantas confidencias en el aire, creo que lo mejor que puedo hacer es marcharme —dijo Hyacinth.

La princesa no puso objeción a que lo hiciera. Parecía evidente que ella y *lady* Aurora estaban a punto de iniciar una gran intimidad y, mientras daba vueltas en la cabeza a esa idea al ir por la calle, se sentía triste por alguna razón extraña y vaga que no hubiera podido explicar.

XXXV

El domingo siguiente pasó casi todo el día con los Muniment, con los que, desde su vuelta al trabajo, no había podido tener una de *aquellas* conversaciones fraternales que habían caracterizado sus primeras relaciones. Aquel domingo fue un día feliz, y contribuyó a que su estimación por el inescrutable Paul aumentara considerablemente. La luz dorada y cálida de septiembre enriquecía hasta la miseria de Audley Court, y cuando el hermano de Rosy y su amigo estaban sentados por la mañana al lado del sofá, los tres se divirtieron mucho trazando una docena de planes para darle un aire festivo al día. Durante los últimos seis meses, había habido momentos en los que Hyacinth estaba convencido de no volver a interesarse por ideas como ésas, y esos momentos iban siempre unidos a la transformación que había sufrido en su mente la imagen del hombre cuya dureza —desde luego estaba obligado a ser duro— no había esperado nunca pudiera volverse contra un admirador apasionado. Pero en aquellos momentos al menos, las nubes se habían disipado y la compañía de Paul era otra vez un apoyo. Nunca se había mostrado tan cariñoso, alegre y seguro; nunca le había parecido tan deseable estar unido a él. Menos que nunca hubiera podido adivinar un observador por qué los dos jóvenes se miraban de cierta manera al estar uno frente a otro. Rosy, naturalmente, tomaba parte en la cuestión que debatían sus compañeros: si limitarían la excursión a un paseo por Hyde Park; si embarcarían en el muelle de Lambeth en el vapor de un penique que los llevara a Greenwich o si irían a la estación de Waterloo para tomar el tren hasta Hampton Court. Rosy no había estado en ninguno de esos sitios, pero tomaba parte en la discusión, para la que parecía estar muy cualificada; hablaba de que el barco iba muy lleno y de los muchos borrachos que iban en él a la vuelta, como si hubiera sufrido todos esos inconvenientes; recordaba a los otros que la vista desde la colina de Greenwich era siempre muy mala por la cantidad de humo que había, y que en aquella época no había gente elegante en Hyde Park, con lo que se perdía casi todo el atractivo del paseo, y se mostraba muy favorable al viejo palacio de Wolsey, cuya historia parecía conocer bien. Tomaba parte en la excursión de su hermano con el mayor entusiasmo, y Hyacinth se sentía una vez más maravillado ante el estoicismo de aquella criatura tan fuerte, curtida por el dolor, y cuya imaginación no se preocupaba jamás de sus propias privaciones, de modo que podía quedarse encerrada en su cuarto toda una tarde de otoño, sin echarse a llorar al ver cómo se colaban los rayos de poniente e iluminaban el mismo papel sucio y feo de las paredes, mientras ella pensaba en unos campos y unos jardines que no vería en su vida. Habló muchísimo de la princesa, y no encontraba palabras para alabar su belleza, su gracia y su bondad; diciendo que de todas las caras que se habían inclinado sobre su cama —y parecían muchas—, ninguna era ni de lejos tan noble y agradable como la suya. Daba la impresión de haber iluminado el cuarto y dejar su luz aun después de marcharse. Rosy podía revivir su imagen igual que podía tararear la música de una canción escuchada y, mientras estaba allí sola en la cama, repetía para sí misma las hermosas tonadas otra vez. La princesa podía ser cualquier cosa, lo mismo una reina que una emperatriz, y ella se daba cuenta de que no podía quejarse del aburrimiento de una vida en la que tales apariciones podían presentarse un día. Había hecho cambiar aquel sitio, le había dado otro aire sólo por ir allí; si le bastaba a una princesa, debía bastarles a quienes eran como ella, y esperaba no volver a oír hablar a su hermano de cambiar de casa y dejar una habitación a la que estaban asociados tan maravillosos recuerdos. La princesa había sabido encontrar el camino a Audley Court, pero quizá no supiera llevarlo a otro sitio, pues no podían esperar que fuera siguiéndolos por Londres como a ellos les apeteciera; y además, como el cuartito le había gustado, si eran un poco listos y se quedaban tranquilos, a lo mejor se le antojaba un día mandarles un trozo de alfombra o un cuadro o un espejo de marco dorado para que estuviera más bonito. Las transiciones de Rosy del puro entusiasmo al cálculo interesado se hacían siempre con una serenidad peculiar y personal. Hablaba tan bien y con tanta gracia, que siempre atraía la atención, pero Hyacinth aquel día se notaba menos tolerante que de costumbre, pues mientras ella hablaba Muniment estaba callado, y lo que deseaba saber era la impresión

que la princesa le había causado a él. Rosy no aludió para nada al monopolio que había disfrutado tanto tiempo sobre tan maravillosa señora; había mostrado siempre una incredulidad indulgente a propósito de las aventuras de Hyacinth entre la alta sociedad, y estaba viendo que pronto llegaría el día en que empezara a hablar de la princesa como si hubiera sido ella quien la había descubierto. Sí tenía mucho que hablar de la amistad que había establecido con *lady* Aurora y le entusiasmaba la idea de haber sido ella quien pusiera en contacto a dos personas tan relevantes. Se las imaginaba hablando entre ellas, en el gran mundo, de la ocasión en que «nos encontramos por vez primera en casa de la señorita Muniment»; y contaba que *lady* Aurora, que había estado en Audley Court la víspera, decía que había contraído con ella una deuda que nunca podría pagarle. Las dos señoras se habían gustado muchísimo y, ¿no era todo un cuadro imaginárselas andando por los aires cogidas de la mano como dos azucenas? Muniment preguntó con cierta grosería y malos modos qué era lo que buscaba de *ella*, lo que llevó a Hyacinth a preguntar a su vez:

—¿Qué quieres decir? ¿Quién busca algo de nadie?

—¿Qué quiere la bella entre las bellas de *nuestra* pobre y simplona *lady*? Son dos tipos completamente distintos. No entiendo mucho de mujeres, pero eso sí puedo verlo.

—¿Dónde ves tú que sean dos tipos distintos? Las dos tienen el sello que corresponde a su rango —dijo Rosy.

—¿Y quién puede decir lo que quieren las mujeres en cualquier momento? —preguntó Hyacinth con la despreocupación de un hombre de mundo.

—Hijo mío, si no sabes más que lo que sé, me has producido una gran desilusión. Si esperamos un poco, quizá nos lo diga ella misma algún día.

—¿Decirte lo que quiere de *lady* Aurora?

—No me importa demasiado *lady* Aurora; pero sí lo que quiere de *nosotros* para pegarse esas caminatas.

—Pero ¿no crees que te mereces una caminata? —preguntó Rosy riéndose—. Si no fueras hermano mío, y no te tuviera tan a mano gracias a eso, y no estuviera condenada a estar en este sofá, recorrería Inglaterra de punta a punta para conocerte. Está enamorado de la princesa —le dijo a Hyacinth— y dice todas esas tonterías para ocultarlo. ¿Qué quiere nadie de nada?

Por fin se decidió que fueran a Greenwich, y después de tomar pan y queso con Rosy se embarcaron en el vapor de un penique. El barco iba muy lleno, y los dos apretujados en la parte delantera, apoyados en la barandilla de cubierta y mirando la franja negra de la amarillenta corriente. Para Hyacinth el río siempre había tenido un gran encanto. La extraña llamada que desde niño habían tenido todos los aspectos de Londres para él, se repetía desde sus oscuras orillas y la sórdida agitación de su seno: los grandes arcos y los pilares de los puentes donde se arremolinaba el agua y se balanceaban las chimeneas de los barcos, donde se repetía el eco de los ruidos y parecía haber una procesión amenazadora e interminable; las millas de muelles y almacenes; las chimeneas, los mástiles y grúas que sobresalían, los letreros de las fábricas que llamaban desde la orilla, las barcazas planas que se afanaban de un lado a otro, dedicadas a algún negocio que nunca se sabría lo que era, pero que siempre resultaba sucio; los barcos de cabotaje y los que transportaban carbón, cada vez más numerosos a medida que iban río abajo, y las barcas pequeñas, que se balanceaban en la estela aceitosa del vapor, y cuyos ocupantes, al levantar la vista hacia ellos, daban la impresión de burlarse; en fin, todo el ajetreo, los humos, los chirridos y el chapoteo del río. Entre la masa de pasajeros, el olor a tabaco malo, la lluvia de hollín y el acompañamiento de una gaita con la que un escocés tocaba de cuando en cuando una danza poco convincente, Hyacinth no quiso hablar a su compañero de lo que más le importaba, pero más tarde, cuando estaban tumbados en la agostada hierba de una de las lomas de Greenwich Park, viendo brillar el río al otro lado de la pomposa columnata del hospital, le preguntó si había algo de verdad en lo que había dicho Rosy de que estaba enamorado de su amiga la princesa. Dijo «su amiga» refiriéndose a los dos, como si por haber estado dos veces en Audley Court, Muniment la conociera tan bien como él mismo. Quería conjurar la idea de estar celoso de Paul, y si deseaba tener información sobre el asunto era porque le molestaba tanto como antes que su camarada pudiera tomarlo a broma. No acababa de comprender que un chico como Muniment cambiara así de un día para otro, pero sabía que había asistido a la mejor exhibición hecha por la princesa de su divino poder de conciliación que, si no era el arte que acostumbraba a poner más en juego en sus relaciones sociales, sí era el más maravilloso de sus secretos, y sería realmente muy raro que un hombre joven y sano no se hubiera visto afectado por él. Hyacinth sabía que Muniment no era muy accesible ni le importaban demasiado las mujeres, pero muy bien podía haber sido ese el caso, sin detrimento de la habilidad de la princesa para hacer milagros. Habían vagado los dos por las grandes salas y patios del hospital, habían contemplado las glorias de la famosa sala de pinturas y habían admirado la larga y colorista serie sobre las victorias navales de Inglaterra; y Muniment le había dicho que suponía que habría visto otras cosas comparables en el

extranjero siendo como era, un repugnante golfillo viajero. No encargaron cena de pescado en el Trafalgar ni en el Ship, porque pensaban tomarse a la vuelta otra más frugal con Rosy a base de té y camarones, pero subieron y bajaron las ondulaciones del parque, tan descuidado y encantador; hicieron algunos avances a los tímidos ciervos, que echaban a correr; vieron chicos y chicas, que colorados y riendo a carcajadas se lanzaban a rodar juntos por las pendientes, miraron el pequeño observatorio de ladrillo, colgado en una de las colinas, que señala la hora de la historia inglesa, y en el que Muniment puso el interés de un experto; salieron del parque por una de las puertas y admiraron el primor de las casitas de Blackheath, donde Muniment declaró que su máxima aspiración sería vivir allí. Señaló dos o tres casitas semiindependientes, revocadas de estuco y con letreros como Villa Mortimer y Los Ciclamoros en la puerta, y Hyacinth comprendió que aquél era el lugar donde le gustaría acabar sus días, en un sitio de aire puro, y con una bonita ventana para colocar al lado la cama de Rosy y ver desde ella a los alegres excursionistas suburbanos. Al volver a entrar en el parque fue cuando, por el calor y por estar algo cansados, se tumbaron bajo un árbol, y Hyacinth no pudo contener su curiosidad:

—¡Enamorado de ella, enamorado de ella; vamos, hombre! —dijo Muniment—. Igual podría enamorarme de la cúpula de San Pablo, que también veo desde allí.

—La cúpula de San Pablo no va a verte y no te dice que le devuelvas la visita.

—Yo no devuelvo visitas, tengo bastantes cosas que hacer para dedicarme a eso. ¿No te basta con saber que no me molesto en ir a ver a la princesa?

—Pues no estoy muy seguro —repuso Hyacinth—. Si fueras a verla por las buenas, y por educación, en vista de que te lo ha pedido, no lo consideraría una prueba de que estás encaprichado. Que te eches atrás es más sospechoso: puede significar que no confías en ti mismo, que tienes miedo de enamorarte si la conoces más íntimamente.

—Es un antojo bien raro que te empeñes en que vaya a ver si puedo lograr algo de ella. Nunca hubiera creído que era eso lo que te convenía —contestó Muniment, mirando al cielo y con las manos cruzadas debajo de la cabeza.

—¿Crees que te tengo miedo? —preguntó Hyacinth, y luego comentó—: Además, ¿qué diablos puede importarme a mí ahora?

Paul no contestó de momento; dio media vuelta con el brazo en el suelo y la cabeza apoyada en la mano. Hyacinth notaba que le estaba mirando, pero como también notaba que se ponía colorado no quiso mirarle. Se había propuesto no caer en la tentación de alusiones poco gratas, pero las palabras se le habían escapado.

—¿Qué quieres decir con eso? —preguntó por fin Muniment.

Y cuando Hyacinth le miró no vio más que su cara de siempre, inocente, tranquila, de hombre sano y fuerte. Su dueño había tenido tiempo de cambiarla antes de hablar.

De repente se apoderó de él un impulso que nunca había sentido, o más bien que había resistido siempre. Había un misterio que necesitaba aclarar para ser feliz, y prescindió de sus escrúpulos, de su orgullo y de la fuerza que creía tener, la fuerza de llevar a cabo su trabajo y desaparecer sin mirar atrás. Estaba sentado en la hierba, con las piernas encogidas y los brazos sobre las rodillas. Los dos se miraron de frente un momento, y luego Hyacinth dijo:

—¡Qué tipo más extraordinario eres!

—¡Ahora sí que has acertado! —sonrió Paul.

—No quiero hacer una escena ni meterme en tus sentimientos, pero ¿qué te parecerá cuando me cuelguen en el patíbulo?

—¿Por lo de Hoffendahl? ¿A eso te referías antes? —Muniment seguía en la misma postura, mordiendo una brizna de hierba que tenía en la mano.

—No pensaba hablar de ello; pero ¿por qué no sacarlo a relucir? Lo he pensado mucho, naturalmente.

—¿Y qué se consigue? —contestó Muniment—. Yo esperaba que no lo hicieras, veía que no hablabas nunca… No te gusta. Más valdría que lo dejaras.

No había en su voz ni un asomo de ironía o de desprecio, ningún signo de que condenara esa actitud. Hablaba con toda tranquilidad, como si hubiera contado siempre con tener que disculpar esas debilidades. Pero precisamente ese tono tan razonable fue lo que le heló el corazón a Hyacinth; era como el roce de una mano muy firme y suave al mismo tiempo, pero espantosamente fría.

—No quiero volverme atrás ni muchísimo menos pero ¿podías creer que me gustaba? —preguntó Hyacinth con una risa más bien forzada.

—Chico, ¿qué quieres que te diga? Te gustan muchísimas cosas que a mí no me gustan nada. Te gustan las emociones fuertes y los cambios, te gustan las sensaciones especiales, mientras que lo que me sienta a mí

es la santa calma, el dulce reposo.

—Pues si no te gustan los cambios y eres tan amigo del agua mansa, ¿cómo se te ha ocurrido meterte en un movimiento revolucionario? —preguntó Hyacinth, como si hubiera hecho un hallazgo.

—Precisamente por eso —contestó Paul con la misma calma—. ¿Acaso nuestro movimiento revolucionario no es tan tranquilo como una tumba? ¿Quién sabe, quién sospecha siquiera la importancia que tiene?

—Ya comprendo. Tú te quedas con la parte tranquila.

Al decir esas palabras, Hyacinth no tenía intención de burlarse, pero se puso colorado en seguida al ver que sonaban bastante mal. Paul, sin embargo, no daba muestras de sentirse ofendido, y contestó con toda amabilidad, como si hubiera estado pensando la mejor forma de animar a su amigo:

—Hay algo que no debes olvidar: las muchas probabilidades de que la maldita llamada no llegue a hacerse nunca.

No deseo que me lo recuerdes —dijo Hyacinth— y además permíteme que te diga que no acabo de imaginarme que tú te metas en cosas que no prosperarán. Todo lo que tenga que ver contigo tiene que resultar, me parece a mí.

Muniment se quedó pensativo, como si encontrara que su amigo era muy ingenuo:

—Pues te aseguro que no tengo nada que ver en ese asunto.

—Con la ejecución puede que no; pero a ver qué me dices de la idea. La noche que me llevaste dabas la impresión de tener mucho que ver con ella.

Paul cambió de postura, se levantó y se sentó a estilo turco al lado de su amigo. Le pasó el brazo por los hombros, y le dio la vuelta para mirarle la cara; luego le dijo en tono muy cariñoso:

—Hay tres o cuatro cosas que están claramente a favor tuyo.

—No quiero consuelos de segunda mano —comentó Hyacinth, con la vista perdida en la bruma lejana que era desde allí Londres.

—¿Pues qué demonios quieres entonces? —dijo Paul sin soltarle y sin perder el humor.

—Pues entenderte un poco; saber lo que siente un hombre cuando está a punto de perder a su mejor amigo.

—¿A punto de perderle?

—Bueno, poniéndonos en lo peor.

—Creí que ya sabrías… si estás a punto de perderme a mí.

Al oír eso, Hyacinth se echó de bruces sobre la hierba y se tapó la cara con las manos. Estuvo mucho tiempo así, sin decir una palabra; y mientras permanecía en esa postura, se le agolparon una serie de ideas y pensó muchas cosas extrañas. Sentía más que nada el esplendor de un día tan hermoso, la calma cálida rota por gritos alegres, la dulzura de estar allí, en una pausa del trabajo, con un amigo que era un tío estupendo, aunque no entendiera ciertas cosas. Paul también estaba callado, y Hyacinth comprendía que no sabía qué hacer. Quería animarle, hizo un esfuerzo por sobreponerse y se levantó; y para salir de la cuestión personal dijo lo primero que se le pasó por la cabeza, sin dejar el tema de que estaban hablando:

—Te lo he preguntado y me lo has dicho, pero no he llegado a entenderlo del todo: por eso vuelvo a tocar el asunto, a ver si me explicas bien para qué crees tú que va a servir.

—El golpe… Bueno, ten en cuenta que hasta ahora sólo lo sabemos muy vagamente. Por lo tanto, es muy difícil calcular la verdadera importancia que pueda tener, y no creo que yo haya pretendido nunca decírtelo cuando he hablado contigo. Supongo que no tendrá demasiada importancia que tu trabajo se lleve adelante o no; pero si se hace, habrá sido un detalle en un esquema, cuyo efecto general ha de ser sin duda beneficioso. Yo creo, y tú pretendes creer también, aunque no estoy muy seguro de que lo hagas, en la llegada de la democracia. Pues a la democracia le servirá mucho conseguir que las clases que los sojuzgan sean amonestadas de cuando en cuando, y que sepan que los otros están completamente decididos a hacerlo. Una gran parte depende de eso, y Hoffendahl es un amonestador de primera clase.

Hyacinth escuchó la explicación con un interés que no era nada fingido; luego contestó:

—Cuando dices que crees en la democracia doy por sentado que deseas que lleguen al poder, como siempre he supuesto. Pero lo que no he entendido nunca es esto: por qué poner en primera fila a toda una masa de personas que casi sin excepción te parecen unos asnos descomunales.

—¡Ay, hijo mío! —rió Paul—, cuando uno se mete en asuntos humanos no tiene más remedio que manejar materiales humanos. Las clases altas son las que tienen las orejas más largas.

—Te he oído decir que estabas trabajando por conseguir la igualdad en las condiciones humanas, por abolir las diferencias inmemoriales. Pues entonces lo que pretendes es que la humanidad entera se transforme en un rebaño de asnos.

—Eso está muy bien. ¿Lo has aprendido en Francia? Pero lo que está muy bien es una marranada tan grande como lo que está muy mal. El bajo nivel de nuestros desgraciados conciudadanos se debe a las malas condiciones; y son las condiciones lo que yo quiero cambiar. Cuando los que no pueden empezar a hablar estén en situación de hacerlo, no dudes de que irán adelante. Quiero ponerlos a prueba, ¿comprendes?

—Pero ¿por qué igualdad? —preguntó Hyacinth—. No sé por qué, pero esa palabra ya no me dice tanto como antes. ¡Desigualdad, desigualdad! No sé si habrá sido a fuerza de repetírmela, pero no me choca tanto.

—¡Pues eso estoy seguro que no te lo han enseñado en Francia! Lo que pasa es que ha cambiado tu punto de vista. Tú has subido.

—¿Subido? ¡Santo Dios!, ¿qué he subido yo?

—Claro que sí, no has dejado nunca de ser presuntuoso.

Y el experto de los laboratorios químicos dio una palmada en la espalda a su amigo.

Hyacinth sintió una momentánea amargura al verse acusado, aunque fuera en broma, de aliarse con los afortunados como clase social, y estuvo a punto de preguntarle a Paul si no había adivinado todavía de qué podía vanagloriarse: si de ser hijo natural de una asesina, de haber nacido en la calle y de que le hubiera recogido una pobre costurera. Pero tenía tanta costumbre de ocultar todas esas cosas que, antes de que pudiera hablar, Paul añadió:

—Si has dejado de creer que podemos hacer algo, la situación será bastante absurda, ¿sabes?

—Yo no sé lo que creo, ¡válgame Dios! —exclamó Hyacinth, en mi tono tan lúgubre que Paul se echó a reír para atenuarlo. Pero Hyacinth le dijo:

—No quiero que creas que ya no me importa el pueblo. ¿Qué soy yo más que uno de los pobres y más poca cosa?

—¿Tú? Tú eres un duque disfrazado, y lo pensé nada más verte. Lo que pasa es que la noche que te llevé a nuestro precioso «intercambio de ideas» (me gustaba ese maldito nombre) tenías algo que me hizo olvidarlo; quiero decir que tu disfraz era aquella noche superior a lo corriente. Y en cuanto a que uno deba preocuparse por el pueblo, no hay ninguna obligación de hacerlo. Yo no lo haría si pudiera; puedes apostar la vida por eso. Todo depende de lo que veas. La forma en que yo he mirado ese pozo de iniquidad que está allí, me ha llevado a comprender que los arreglos que hay ahora no sirven. No pueden servir —repitió con toda tranquilidad.

—Sí, yo eso también lo veo —dijo Hyacinth, en el mismo tono doliente con que había hablado un momento antes; una tristeza que nacía de su sensación de impotencia al comprobar, una y otra vez, que veía siempre muchas cosas más. Veía la inmensa miseria del pueblo, pero veía también todo lo que había sido rescatado y redimido de esa miseria: los tesoros, los hallazgos, los esplendores y éxitos del mundo. Todo eso tomaba a veces en su imaginación la forma de una vasta presencia vaga y deslumbrante, una luz irradiada por objetos indefinidos, mezclados con la atmósfera de París y de Venecia.

Dijo que muchas de las cosas que Muniment le había contado sobre los horrores que sucedían en los barrios más pobres de Londres, cuadros de increíble vergüenza y sufrimiento que había puesto ante sus ojos, volvían a su memoria y le recordaban la indignación que le habían producido entonces.

—No quiero que te guíes por lo que yo te he dicho; quiero que te guíes por lo que tú mismo has visto. Recuerdo que me dijiste algunas cosas que a su modo tampoco estaban mal.

Y dicho esto, Paul se levantó como si la conversación hubiera llegado a su fin y tuvieran que pensar en volver a casa. Hyacinth también se levantó, mientras su compañero permanecía de pie, mirando hacia Londres, con una cara que expresaba toda la sencillez y sinceridad de sus creencias. De repente, como si quisiera completar o confirmar la declaración que había hecho poco antes, dijo:

—No, no creo en la edad dorada, pero sí que creo en la democracia con un poco de suerte.

Al decir esas palabras, a Hyacinth le pareció la mejor encarnación del espíritu del pueblo; estaba allí, con toda su poderosa naturalidad, y con tal aire de haber aprendido lo que había aprendido y de estar dispuesto a emplearlo, que Hyacinth sintió que le invadía una vez más el orgullo de tener por amigo a una persona tan prometedora y de una naturaleza tan capaz. Le pasó la mano por el brazo, que era mucho más largo y fuerte que el suyo, y dijo con imperceptible temblor en la voz:

—No sirve de nada que digas que no me guíe por lo que tú dices. Siempre me guiaré por lo que me digas. No hay por qué ocultarlo. No sé si creo exactamente lo que tú crees, pero en lo que sí creo es en ti. Después de todo, ¿no viene a ser lo mismo?

Paul apreció sin duda la cordialidad y la ingenuidad de aquel pequeño tributo, y su manera de demostrarlo fue pegarle un codazo a su compañero antes de andar, y mirarle desde su altura con cierta ansiedad amistosa:

—No te habría llevado nunca aquella noche de no haber sabido que ibas a lanzarte sobre el asunto. Fue aquel discursito tan ardiente que echaste en el club, cuando dejaste por los suelos a Delancey por decir que tenías miedo, lo que me animó a llevarte.

—¡Vaya si me lancé!; y no era otra cosa lo que yo andaba buscando. ¡De eso no hay duda! —dijo Hyacinth muy contento mientras echaban a andar.

Había una nota de heroísmo en esas palabras, un heroísmo cuyo sentido no se le comunicó a Muniment a través de sus brazos entrelazados. Hyacinth no se paraba a pensar que era un hombre de un prosaísmo infernal; desechó el problema sentimental que le había preocupado; olvidó, perdonó y admiró, y se dejó absorber, sintiéndose feliz por el momento, en la idea de que Paul era una gran persona, que la amistad era un sentimiento más puro que el amor, y enorme el afecto que entre los dos existía. Ni siquiera se daba cuenta en aquel momento de que era él quien tenía que ponerlo casi todo.

XXXVI

Cierto domingo de noviembre, más de tres meses después de haberse ido a vivir a Madeira Crescent, fue tan importante para la princesa que ha de ser tratado con cierta extensión. A primeras horas de la tarde oyó que llamaban muy fuerte a la puerta; era una llamada resuelta, casi desafiante, que le hizo levantar la vista del libro y escuchar. Estaba sola, sentada junto al fuego, leyendo un grueso volumen sobre el trabajo y el capital. No eran todavía las cuatro, pero ya tenía encendidas las velas; una niebla densa y negruzca oscurecía la luz del día, y no se sabía si lo que la naturaleza se había propuesto era velar el aburrimiento sabático o hacerlo más profundo todavía. No estaba cansada de Madeira Crescent; habría rechazado indignada esa idea, pero no le molestaba nada la posibilidad de recibir una visita, que hasta podría ser la de un embajador, un ministro o cualquier otro personaje eminente de los que habían estado en relación con ella antes de que se dedicara a la vida ascética. Desde entonces, no eran muchos los que habían llamado a su puerta, y eso por varias razones: estaban fuera de Londres, y ella había hecho lo posible para hacerles creer que se había marchado de Inglaterra. Ésa era la impresión prevaleciente, la que ella había deseado, pero olvidaba ese detalle siempre que con cierta sorpresa, incluso con cierta irritación, veía que la gente no se encaminaba a Madeira Crescent. Estaba logrando el descubrimiento, en el que tenía muchos predecesores, de que ocultarse en Londres es un juego demasiado fácil. Godfrey Sholto tenía la costumbre de anunciarse de esa forma cuando reaparecía después de los intervalos que ella le obligaba a guardar; era algo estúpido en un hombre como él, dar tanta importancia a demostrar que podía llamar confiado, que tenía el mismo derecho que otro cualquiera. Esa tarde habría aceptado su visita; estaba ya muy alejada del mundo frívolo y superficial en que él vivía, pero al mismo tiempo su renunciación era demasiado reciente para no disfrutar con recuerdos y comparaciones, con poder probarse a sí misma lo acertada que había estado al hacer lo que estaba haciendo. No se le ocurrió pensar que quien estaba a la puerta pudiera ser Hyacinth Robinson, pues habían quedado de acuerdo en que no fuera a verla más que por la noche salvo en casos especiales. Al salir a abrir la criada, oyó en el *hall* una voz que no reconoció de momento, pero en seguida la puerta de la habitación se abrió y oyó pronunciar el nombre del señor Muniment. No le molestó nada oírlo, pues había deseado saber algo más del extraordinario amigo de Hyacinth y al mismo tiempo lo daba ya por perdido, pues las probabilidades de que fuera a verla parecían escasísimas. Tres meses antes le había dicho a Hyacinth que se alegraba de que no quisiera ir; pero ya que había ido se alegraba más aún.

En esos momentos estaba sentado frente a ella, al otro lado de la chimenea, con las piernas cruzadas, y sin saber qué hacer con sus grandes manos, enfundadas en unos guantes muy nuevos y de una piel muy roja, que se ajustaba y alisaba como si le hicieran daño. En cuanto al tamaño de sus extremidades, y hasta su actitud y movimientos, podía haber pertenecido a su antiguo círculo. Con los detalles de su traje algo borrosos por la luz de la lámpara que iluminaba sobre todo su cabeza noble y poderosa, podía haber sido uno de los hombres más importantes que había conocido. Lo primero que le dijo fue que le extrañaba mucho qué era lo que le había decidido por fin a presentarse, pues cuando ella se lo propuso quedó bien claro que la idea le atraía muy poco. Desde entonces no le había visto más que una vez, el día en que llegaba a Audley Court y en el momento en que ella salía de visitar a su hermana, y suponía que recordaría que ese día no había vuelto a invitarle.

—Entonces no hubiera servido de nada que lo hiciera —contestó Muniment con su natural jovialidad.

—Sí, lo noté; mi silencio no fue casual —contestó la princesa con el mismo buen humor.

—Ahora sólo he venido (ya que me lo pregunta) porque mi hermana me ha estado machacando semana tras semana, metiéndome en la cabeza que debía venir. ¡Ha sido un tormento! Si me hubiera dejado en paz, no habría venido.

La princesa se puso algo colorada al oír esas palabras, pero no porque le molestaran o le dieran vergüenza, sino más bien por la alegría que le producía oír hablar de una manera tan espontánea y original.

No había recibido nunca una visita que mostrara tan absoluta franqueza o que tuviese una historia tan curiosa que contar. No había tenido nunca un fracaso tan rotundo, y ese fracaso le interesaba muchísimo, sobre todo cuando parecía empezar a transformarse en éxito. Siempre había tenido éxito con todo el mundo y a la primera, y la señal que todos le daban era un homenaje de lo más monótono. Hasta el pobre Hyacinth había intentado decir grandes cosas al principio. Aquel tipo tan distinto parecía estar pensando en cualquier cosa menos en florituras de lenguaje; y estaba encantada con la esperanza de que se apartara cada vez más de semejante artificio.

—Recuerdo que me preguntó que de qué iba a servirle. No pude decírselo entonces y, aunque he tenido mucho tiempo para darle vueltas, no lo he pensado todavía.

—Bueno, mas espero que me sirva de algo. Todo el mundo quiere tener alguna recompensa cuando ha hecho un esfuerzo grande.

—A *mí* ya me está sirviendo —dijo la princesa con naturalidad también.

—Claro, las cosas que digo le divierten. Pero no las digo para eso, sólo para que se forme una idea.

—Pues me está proporcionando muchas ideas. Además, sé mucho de usted.

—Supongo que por el pequeño Robinson —dijo Muniment.

Ella tardó un poco en contestar:

—Más bien por *lady* Aurora.

—¡Huy, no es mucho lo que sabe de mí! —protestó el joven.

—Es una pena que lo diga, porque ella le aprecia mucho.

—Sí, me aprecia mucho —admitió el joven tranquilamente.

La princesa vaciló otra vez:

—Y espero que usted también la aprecie.

—¡Ah, sí, es una vieja estupenda!

La princesa comprendió que su visitante no era un caballero como Hyacinth; pero eso no le hizo cambiar de actitud. La esperanza de que lo fuera no tenía nada que ver con el interés que sentía por él, y que estaba basado en que probablemente tampoco le importaba nada al joven.

—Creo que no hay en el mundo otra persona a quien envidie tanto —dijo. Afirmación que no obtuvo respuesta de su visitante—. Ha sabido resolver mejor que nadie el problema que, a poco sentido que tengamos, todos tratamos de resolver, ¿no es verdad? El de salir de nosotros mismos. Ella ha sabido hacerlo mejor que ninguna otra persona que yo haya conocido. Se ha entregado por completo a hacer algo por los demás. Por eso es por lo que la envidio —concluyó la princesa, con una sonrisa aclaratoria por si acaso no la entendía.

—Es una diversión como otra cualquiera —dijo Paul Muniment.

—No, no como otra cualquiera. Lleva la luz a muchos sitios; hace que mucha gente desgraciada se sienta menos desgraciada.

—¿Cuántos cree usted? —preguntó, no como si tuviera ganas de discutir, sino más bien como si le divirtiera siempre hacerlo.

Pero la princesa no acababa de comprender por qué quería discutir a costa de *lady* Aurora:

—Pues, para empezar, a una persona que le toca a usted muy de cerca.

—Sí, es muy buena, bonísima, realmente maravillosa. Pero es Rosy la que le hace a ella mucho menos desgraciada —añadió Muniment.

—Es muy probable, desde luego; y lo mismo me pasa a mí.

—¿Puedo preguntar qué la hace a usted desgraciada?

—Pues nada. Y eso es lo peor. Pero soy ahora mucho más feliz que antes.

—¿Y también por nada?

—No, por un cambio habido en mi vida. He podido hacer unas pocas cosas.

—Para los pobres, me imagino que quiere decir. ¿Se refiere a los regalos que le ha hecho a Rosy? —preguntó el joven.

—¿Los regalos? —Parecía no acordarse—. ¡No!, eso son cosas sin importancia. No es nada que uno haya podido dar. Son algunas conversaciones que ha tenido, algunas convicciones a que ha podido llegar.

—Las convicciones son una fuente de placer muy inocente —dijo Muniment, sonriendo a su interlocutora con la mirada resuelta y agradable que tenía, y que parecía llegar más allá y con más fuerza que la de cualquiera otra persona.

—Tenerlas no es nada. Lo que hace falta es obrar de acuerdo con ellas —contestó la princesa.

—Sí, no cabe duda de que también está bien.

Siguió mirándola con toda tranquilidad, como si le gustara pensar que a lo mejor le había llamado para

eso. Y como no decía nada más, la princesa continuó:

—Claro que es mucho mejor si uno es hombre.

—Pues no lo sé. Las mujeres se las arreglan muy bien para hacer lo que quieren. Mi hermana y usted se las han arreglado para traerme aquí.

—Sospecho que ha sido más bien su hermana, no yo. Pero, después de todo, ¿por qué iba a disgustarle tanto venir?

—Bueno, ya que me lo pregunta —dijo Paul Muniment—, voy a decírselo francamente, aunque no quiero decir que no acabo de entenderla.

—A casi todos les pasa lo mismo —contestó la princesa—. Pero generalmente corren el riesgo.

—¡Ah, muy bien! Es que yo soy el más prudente de los hombres.

—Estaba segura de eso; y era una de las razones por las que deseaba conocerle. Conozco algunas de las ideas que tiene; me lo ha dicho Hyacinth Robinson; y uno de los motivos de que me interesen es que piensa siempre con mucho cuidado todo lo que se propone hacer.

—Sí, eso sí que lo hago… —admitió Muniment.

El tono podía haber resultado casi indigno por una especie de reserva muy del norte que había en él, pero aparecía atenuado por la expresión de su rostro, por su juventud y su fuerza, y por la mirada de sus ojos, que casi eran los de un soldado.

La princesa reconoció la astucia y la naturalidad al contestar:

—Hacer algo con usted sería muy seguro. El éxito estaría garantizado.

—Eso es lo que cree el pobre Hyacinth.

Le extrañó que pudiera aludir con tanta ligereza a la confianza que su amigo había puesto en él, teniendo en cuenta las consecuencias que tal confianza pudiera acarrearle; pero aquella curiosa mezcla de cualidades sólo podía hacer que su visitante, como tribuno del pueblo, le resultara aún más interesante. De momento, se abstuvo de tocar el tema de la especial posición de Hyacinth, y preguntó:

—¿No le ha hablado de mí? ¿No le ha explicado un poco cómo soy?

—¡Uf, menudas son sus explicaciones! —rompió a reír Muniment—. Es un número cuando se pone a hablar de usted.

—No me traicione —dijo ella con dulzura.

—No hay nada que traicionar. Usted sería la primera en admirarse si lo viera. Aparte de eso, yo no traiciono —añadió.

—Yo le quiero mucho —dijo la princesa; y ni el hombre más cínico hubiera podido reírse ante la forma en que hizo esa declaración.

Paul la aceptó con respeto:

—Es muy buen chico y, dejando aparte a su señoría, es la verdadera alegría de nuestra pobre casa.

Hubo una pausa después de aquel intercambio de amabilidades, a la que puso fin la princesa preguntando:

—¿No podría cualquier otro hacer su trabajo tan bien como él?

—¿Su trabajo? No sé por qué, he oído decir que es un maestro.

—No me refiero a la encuadernación —dijo la princesa—. No sé si lo sabe, pero yo mantengo correspondencia con cierta persona. Si me entiende algo, sabrá de quién hablo. Conozco a muchos de nuestros más importantes hombres.

—Sí, ya lo sé. Me lo ha dicho Hyacinth. ¿Lo menciona como garantía, para que pueda comprender que es persona segura?

—No, no exactamente, sería una debilidad, ¿no? Mi seguridad debe estar en mí misma, algo que pueda usted apreciar a medida que me conozca mejor; no en lo que diga ni en quienes puedan ser mis fiadores.

—No voy a conocerla mejor. ¿Qué tiene que ver eso conmigo?

—Quiero ayudarlos —dijo, y al pronunciar esas palabras se le transformó la cara: expresaba un anhelo apasionado pero purísimo—. Quiero hacer algo por la causa que representan; por los millones de personas que se están pudriendo bajo nuestros pies; por todos esos millones que se pasan la vida al borde de la inanición y que, con un poco que los empujen, están perdidos. Póngame a prueba; pídame que me ocupe en algo, que demuestre que tengo tanto interés como los que ya lo han demostrado. Sé muy bien de qué hablo, con qué tengo que contar, y con lo que puedo encontrarme, y conozco la naturaleza y la importancia de su organización. No estoy bromeando. No, no estoy bromeando.

Paul Muniment siguió mirándola con la misma sonrisa hasta que terminó ese repentino estallido:

—Me temía que fuera usted así… que iba a abrir la espita y a soltar los fuegos artificiales.

—Permítame creer que no pensaba nada de eso. No hay razón alguna para que le molesten mis fuegos

artificiales.

—Siempre he tenido miedo a las mujeres listas.

—Comprendo… es parte de su prudencia —dijo la princesa pensativa—. Pero precisamente es usted la clase de hombre que debía saber cómo tratarlas.

No contestó nada de momento; por la forma en que la miraba daba la impresión de no fijarse mucho en lo que decía, sino de estar más bien ocupado con otras cosas que no tenían mucho que ver: su belleza, su gracia, y el espectáculo de una clase y una forma de comportarse completamente nuevas para él. Al cabo de un rato comentó:

—Temo ser muy ordinario.

—Sí que lo es, pero eso no importa. Lo que más me molesta es que no conteste a mis preguntas. ¿No podría hacer otro el trabajo de Hyacinth Robinson tan bien como él? ¿Es necesario acudir a una naturaleza tan delicada y tan intelectual como la suya? ¿No sería mejor reservarle para algo más refinado?

—¿Más refinado que qué?

—Que lo que van a mandarle que haga.

—Y haga el favor de decirme: ¿qué es? —preguntó el joven—. No sabe nada de eso, ni más ni menos que yo. Además, si había otro que pudiera hacerlo, no hubo nadie que se ofreciera. En cambio, da la casualidad de que Robinson sí lo hizo.

—Sí, y ustedes le echaron el guante —contestó la princesa.

Esa expresión le hizo reír a Muniment:

—No me cabe duda de que puede quedarse con él si le apetece.

—Lo que querría es hacerlo yo en su lugar, eso es lo que me gustaría —dijo la princesa.

—Digo que no sabe de qué se trata.

—Puede que no sea nada —continuó ella, sin apartar los ojos de Paul—. Me atrevería a decir que cree que quería verle para rogarle que le dejaran. Pero no era por eso. Es un asunto suyo y usted no tiene nada que hacer. Pero ¿no podría representar alguna diferencia que hayan cambiado sus opiniones?

—¿Sus opiniones? Si no ha tenido nunca opiniones —contestó Muniment—. Él no es como usted y como yo.

—Bueno, pues sus sentimientos, sus preferencias. Ya no tiene el entusiasmo por el triunfo de la causa popular que tenía cuando le conocí. Ahora es mucho más tibio.

—¡Muy bien! Tiene razón.

La princesa le miró asombrada:

—¿Quiere decir que usted también abandona…?

—Un conservador bien convencido es una cosa que yo comprendo perfectamente —dijo Paul Muniment —. Si yo estuviera arriba, me agarraría con todas mis fuerzas.

—Veo que no tiene usted una mente estrecha —dijo ella convencida.

—Le ruego que me perdone, sí que la tengo. Yo a eso no le llamo tenerla amplia. Hay que ser estrecho para penetrar.

—Sea lo que sea, tendrá éxito —dijo la princesa—. Hyacinth no lo tendrá, pero usted sí.

—Todo depende de lo que entienda por éxito —dijo el joven, y en seguida, antes de que ella pudiera replicar, comentó mirando la habitación—: Tiene usted una casa muy bonita.

—¿Bonita? Señor mío, es detestable. Por eso me gusta —se apresuró a explicar.

—Pues a mí me gusta, aunque quizá no sé por qué. Creí que había dejado todas sus cosas, que las había tirado por la ventana para armar la gran arrebatiña.

—Sí, eso *he* hecho. Tenía que haberme visto antes.

—Me habría gustado —sonrió con timidez—. Me gusta ver la riqueza sólida.

—¡Bah! Vale usted tan poco como Hyacinth. Aquí la única firme soy yo —contestó la princesa.

—Pues le queda todavía mucho para ser una persona que lo ha tirado todo.

—Es que estas abominaciones no son mías, si no ya las habría tirado también —contestó ella con toda naturalidad.

Paul se levantó de la silla, sin dejar de mirar la habitación:

—Pues daría yo una mano por tener un sitio como éste. En fin, sea lo que sea, no se ha quedado usted en la miseria.

—No, todavía me queda un poco… para ayudarle.

—Me apostaría cualquier cosa a que le queda bastante —declaró Paul con su acento de campesino del norte.

—Podría conseguir dinero… podría conseguir dinero —dijo ella muy seria.

Se había levantado también y estaba delante de él.

Los dos estaban frente a frente, sus ojos volvieron a encontrarse e intercambiaron una mirada profunda para intentar escudriñarse mutuamente. Parecía que cada uno de ellos estuviera sondeando la mente del otro. Luego, una expresión rara e inesperada para la princesa apareció en la cara de su visitante; contrajo los labios como si hiciera un gran esfuerzo, empezó a ponerse colorado, y al cabo de un momento estaba tan azorado como un chiquillo. Bajó los ojos y se quedó mirando la alfombra mientras repetía:

—No me fío de las mujeres, no me fío de las mujeres listas.

—Pues lo siento, pero después de todo también lo comprendo —dijo ella—; en vista de eso no voy a insistir en que me deje trabajar con usted. Pero sí voy a pedirle una cosa: ayúdeme un poco a mí, ayúdeme.

—¿Qué quiere decir ayudarla? —preguntó al tiempo que levantaba los ojos, que habían recobrado la calma.

—Que me aconseje, usted sabrá cómo hacerlo. Estoy preocupada… he ido muy lejos.

—¡Eso no lo dudo! —contestó Paul riéndose.

—Quiero decir con algunas de esas personas que están fuera. No tengo miedo, pero me preocupa. Me gustaría saber qué hacer.

—No, desde luego no tiene miedo —contestó Muniment pasado un momento.

—Pero estoy metida en un buen lío. Creo que usted podría sacarme de él. Ya le daré los detalles, pero no ahora, porque nos van a interrumpir, oigo a mi vieja amiga en la escalera. Tiene que volver otra vez.

Mientras estaba todavía hablando se abrió la puerta, y apareció *madame* Grandoni con muchas precauciones y casi sin hacer ruido, como si no supiera qué podía estar pasando en el salón.

—Sí, volveré —dijo Paul, en voz baja, pero con suficiente claridad.

Salió de la habitación, se cruzó con *madame* Grandoni en la puerta, y no se acordó de dar la mano para despedirse. Se paró un momento al oír que se acercaba la princesa, y pudo comprender que no había salido para hacerle cumplir con ese rito, sino para decirle una vez más, en voz baja, de forma que no pudiera oírla su amiga:

—Podría conseguir dinero, podría hacerlo.

Él se pasó la mano por el pelo y, como si no lo hubiese oído, comentó:

—Por fin no he dicho nada de lo que me había encargado Rosy.

—Bueno, eso no importa —contestó la princesa, y volvió al salón.

Madame Grandoni estaba en medio de la habitación, envuelta en su viejo chal, mirando a todas partes, y las dos oyeron que se cerraba la puerta.

—¿Podrías decirme quién es ése? ¿No es una cara nueva?

—Es el hermano de esa chica a quien te llevé a ver, la inválida que habla tanto y se maneja tan bien.

—¡Ah, tenía un hermano! ¿Entonces por eso ibas tú?

Fue una cosa rara que la princesa acogiera con tan buen humor esa salida más bien grosera, que sólo podía escapársele a *madame* Grandoni porque estaba ya cansada con sus muchos años, y porque sentía una antipatía cada vez mayor por Madeira Crescent y todo lo que saliera de allí. Christina le dedicó una sonrisa caritativa a su vieja compañera y contestó:

—Era muy probable que no le hubiésemos visto. Estaba trabajando, como es natural.

—¿Y cómo quieres que lo sepa yo, hija mía? ¿Es un sustituto?

—¿Un sustituto?

—Sí, del encuadernador.

—*Mia cara* —dijo la princesa—. Comprenderás lo absurda que es tu pregunta cuando te diga que es su mejor amigo.

XXXVII

Media hora después de haberse marchado el químico experto oyó otra vez llamar a la puerta; pero era una llamada breve y discreta, acompañada de un repiqueteo débil. Quien lo había provocado fue introducido en la casa, sin que *madame* Grandoni volviera la cabeza o, más bien, levantara la vista del sillón —tan bajo como una bañera y de forma muy parecida a ese receptáculo— en el que estaba sumergida junto al fuego. Dejaba ese cuidado a la princesa, que se levantó al oír el nombre del visitante, mal pronunciado por su doncella. Assunta dijo mister Vetch, pero su ama reconoció sin dificultad al violinista pequeño y gordo de quien le había hablado Hyacinth, que era el mejor amigo de Pinnie, había estado tan unido a su existencia, y a quien ella siempre había sentido curiosidad por conocer. Hyacinth no le había dicho que pensara visitarla, y su inesperada aparición aumentaba el interés. Con todo lo que le gustaba ver tipos raros y explorar rincones alejados, cualquier nuevo encuentro o nueva amistad de esa clase la ponía siempre nerviosa, tenía miedo de quedarse corta, de no acertar con el tono apropiado. En seguida se dio cuenta de que mister Vetch iba a aceptarla como era y de que no necesitaba especiales ajustes; era un caballero y hombre con experiencia, y sólo necesitaba dejarle que diera el tono él. Estaba allí de pie, sosteniendo con las dos manos su sombrero, grande y brillante; un sombrero a la moda de diez años antes, un poco rozado y con el ala torcida, y se había quedado quieto, sin saludar ni decir nada, con una pequeña sonrisa de prueba, que parecía interrogar y explicar algo al mismo tiempo. Explicaba al menos que se podía confiar en él, y que si se había presentado de esa forma, sin ceremonia y sin que le invitaran, era porque tenía motivos que iban a parecerle a ella suficientes en cuanto le escuchara. Había hasta cierta osadía en la confianza que mostraba: casi una insinuación de que sabía cómo presentarse ante una señora y, aunque en seguida se demostró que efectivamente sabía hacerlo, ese fue el único fallo que tuvo. Porque revelaba una gran experiencia de estar con las actrices en los ensayos y de los hábitos que había cogido al tratar con ellas.

—Ya sé quién es, ya sé quién es —dijo la princesa, aunque era muy fácil ver que él ya se había dado cuenta.

—Lo que quizá no sepa es para qué he venido a verla —contestó mister Vetch, presentándole la copa del sombrero como si fuera un espejo.

—No, pero no importa. Me alegro mucho, y podía haber venido antes si quería. —Luego preguntó con su característica honradez—: ¿No sabe el gran interés que me tomo por su sobrino?

—¿Mi sobrino? Sí, mi amigo Robinson. Ha sido por causa de él por lo que me he atrevido a invadir su casa.

Iba a ofrecerle una silla, pero se detuvo y se quedó mirándole con una sonrisa:

—Espero que no haya venido para pedirme que le deje.

—Al contrario, al contrario —contestó el viejo, que alzó la mano expresivamente y ladeó la cabeza como si estuviera sosteniendo el violín.

—¿Qué quiere usted decir al contrario? —preguntó ella, después de haberse sentado los dos. Como si le pareciera que podía resultar contradictorio, añadió—: Me imagino que no tendrá miedo de que deje de ser amiga suya.

—Yo no sé lo que teme ni tampoco sé lo que espera —repuso mister Vetch, que miraba a la princesa con una cara en la que ella podía ver algo más reconfortante que una mera cortesía anticuada—. Va a ser difícil decírselo, pero tengo que intentarlo por lo menos. En realidad, creo que no es asunto mío, ya que no soy pariente del chico; pero le he conocido desde que era una pulga (no es que abulte mucho más ahora), y no puedo menos de decirle que le agradezco mucho que haya sido tan amable con él.

—De todas maneras, no creo que le guste —declaró la princesa—. A mí no me sería difícil decir cualquier cosa.

—Me ha hablado muy poco de usted; no sabe que he dado este paso —dijo el violinista, que recorrió con

los ojos la habitación y los detuvo en *madame* Grandoni.

—¿Y por qué dice que ha dado ese «paso»? La gente suele hablar así cuando tiene que hacer algo desagradable.

—Es muy raro que yo visite a alguna señora. Hace mucho tiempo que no he estado en casa de una persona como la princesa Casamassima. Recuerdo la última vez que lo hice —dijo el viejo—. Fue para cobrar el dinero que me correspondía por haber estado tocando en casa de una señora que daba un baile.

—Tiene que traer alguna vez el violín y tocar para nosotras. Y no por dinero, naturalmente —añadió la princesa.

—Lo haré con mucho gusto, así como cualquier otra cosa que le agrade. Pero mi habilidad es muy limitada. Sólo sé música vulgar, esas cosas que se tocan en los teatros.

—No lo creo. También tocará cosas para sí mismo cuando esté solo en su casa.

Mister Vetch tardó un poco en contestar:

—Ahora que la veo y la oigo, puedo entenderlo mejor.

—¡Si yo creo que no me ve! —rió la princesa.

Y el violinista preguntó si había algún peligro de que apareciera Hyacinth mientras él estaba allí. Ella le dijo que sólo iba por la noche y después de haber quedado en hacerlo, y al pedirle mister Vetch que no le dijera que había estado con ella, contestó:

—Es igual, lo adivinará, lo sabrá por instinto en cuanto entre por la puerta. Es terriblemente avispado.

Luego comentó que nunca había podido ocultarle nada. Claro que quizá le estuviera bien empleado por tratar de hacer un misterio de cosas que no tenían ninguna importancia.

—¡Qué bien le conoce! —exclamó el violinista, que volvió a fijarse en *madame* Grandoni, que seguía contemplando el fuego sin hacerle caso.

No acababa de decir para qué había ido, y sus dudas no podían tener más motivo que la presencia de la señora vieja. Creía que la princesa se habría dado cuenta; confiaba en poder dárselo a entender con la claridad suficiente, pero con delicadeza. Pero ella lo único que pareció entender fue que deseaba que le presentara a su amiga:

—Es necesario que conozca a la más encantadora de las mujeres. Ella también se toma mucho interés por el señor Robinson: un interés muy distinto al mío, mucho más sentimental —dijo.

Y luego le explicó a su amiga, que parecía absorta en otras ideas, que mister Vetch era un gran músico, una persona con quien ella, que había conocido a tantas otras en sus tiempos y que era tan aficionada a esas cosas, tendría mucho gusto en hablar. La princesa hablaba de «esas cosas» como si ella también las hubiera abandonado por completo, aunque *madame* Grandoni la oía muchas veces improvisar al piano himnos revolucionarios y marchas triunfales.

—Creo que se está riendo de mí —dijo mister Vetch.

Mientras, la otra señora se daba la vuelta despacio y empezaba a mirarle. Le miró convenientemente, de arriba abajo, y soltó un suspiro:

—¡Gente extraña, gente extraña!

—Sí, la verdad que es un mundo muy extraño, señora —respondió el violinista, que luego preguntó a la princesa si podría hablar con ella en privado.

Ella miró alrededor un poco confusa, y sonrió:

—Mire, es que no tengo más que esta habitación para recibir. Vivimos en un plan muy modesto.

—Sí, su excelencia se está riendo de mí. Sus ideas son también muy amplias. De todas formas, tendré mucho gusto en volver en cualquier otro momento que sea mejor para usted.

—Me adjudica un buen humor que realmente no tengo. ¿Por qué iba a estar alegre? —preguntó la princesa—. Me encantaría volver a verle. Tengo mucha curiosidad por saber lo que puede decirme. Podríamos encontrarnos en cualquier sitio, si quiere, en Kensington Gardens o en el Museo Británico.

La miró detenidamente antes de contestar, y luego, mientras su pálida cara de viejo se ruborizaba, exclamó:

—¡Pobrecito Hyacinth!

Madame Grandoni hizo un esfuerzo por levantarse de su asiento, pero estaba tan hundida que no lo consiguió a la primera. Mister Vetch le echó una mano, y así pudo ponerse de pie. Le miró un momento y dijo:

—¿Qué es lo que me ha dicho? ¿Que es usted un gran músico? ¿Y no le basta con eso? Tendría que estar usted contento, caballero. He conocido a otras personas, a las que no creo que sobrepase usted, que estaban muy satisfechas.

—Yo no sobrepaso a nadie —dijo el pobre mister Vetch—. No sé por quién me toma.

—¡Ah! ¿No es un perverso revolucionario? ¿No es un conspirador ni un asesino? Me sorprende, pero lo celebro. En esta casa nunca puede saberse. No es una casa recomendable, y si usted es una persona decente es una lástima que venga aquí. Sí, ella está muy alegre y yo estoy muy triste. No sé cómo va a acabar todo esto. Después de mí, eso espero. El mundo no está nada bien, desde luego, pero sólo Dios puede mejorarlo.

Como el violinista expresara su esperanza de que no se marchaba por culpa de él, *madame* Grandoni continuó:

—*Doch, doch*, sí me voy por culpa suya pero ¿qué importa que sea usted u otro cualquiera? Estoy marchándome continuamente por culpa de alguien o de algo, pero prefiero hacerlo por culpa de un hombre decente, suponiendo que usted lo sea, aunque, como le digo, ¿quién puede saberlo?, que por un destructor. Voy de un lado a otro. No tengo descanso. Pero tengo un cuarto muy bonito: el mejor de la casa. A mí, al menos, no me trata mal. Si pudieran ustedes cambiar el clima, todo lo demás resultaría muy pasadero. Buenas noches, sea quien sea.

La pobre señora salió arrastrando los pies a pesar de las renovadas protestas de mister Vetch, y mientras el objeto de sus críticas estaba delante del fuego, mirándolos a los dos y viendo como él abría la puerta.

—Se va, vuelve; en fin, no importa. Le parece que es una casa muy mala, pero sabe que sería aún peor sin ella. Ahora me acuerdo de usted —continuó la princesa—; el señor Robinson me dijo que había sido un gran demócrata en sus viejos tiempos, pero que ha dejado de interesarse por el pueblo.

—¿El pueblo… el pueblo? Eso es una tontería. ¿A quién se refiere?

Ella dudó un momento:

—Los que le importaban a usted, los que defendía; los que están debajo de todos los demás, y de todo lo demás, y que tienen todo el peso encima para aplastarlos.

—Ya veo que me toma por un renegado. Esa forma que tienen algunas clases de arrogarse el título de pueblo no me ha gustado nunca. ¿Por qué hay unos seres humanos que son el pueblo, sólo el pueblo, y los demás no? Yo soy tan pueblo como los otros, he trabajado toda mi vida igual que un afilador y no he cambiado nunca.

—No permita que le ponga de mal humor. A veces soy muy irritante, pero tiene que pararme. Es probable que no lo crea pero no hay otra persona que aguante una reprimenda tan bien como yo —dijo la princesa riéndose mientras volvía a sentarse.

Mister Vetch bajó los ojos; parecía querer dar a entender que tomaba esas palabras como un ardid de mujer, y que sería una falta de respeto tomarlas muy al pie de la letra:

—Lo que yo quiero es que usted… que usted… —Pero se paró antes de seguir adelante.

Ella le miraba y le escuchaba con atención, y esperó a que volviera a hablar. Fue una pausa larga, y no dijo nada. El viejo, por fin, rompió a hablar:

—Princesa, daría muchas veces mi vida por la de ese chico.

—¡Siempre le he dicho que tenía usted que quererle! —exclamó ella con gran alegría.

—¿Quererle? ¿Quién puede ponerlo en duda? ¡Si le he hecho yo, le he inventado yo!

—Y él lo sabe —sonrió la princesa—. Es una organización perfecta.

Y, como el violinista la miraba dando muestras de no saber muy bien a qué atenerse, la princesa continuó:

—Es para mí una gran oportunidad de enterarme de algunas cosas. Háble me de cuando era pequeño. ¿Cómo era de niño? Cuando la gente me gusta, me gusta del todo, y quiero saberlo todo de ella.

—No podía suponer que le quedase mucho que aprender de nuestro amigo. Se ha adueñado usted de su vida —añadió mister Vetch pensativo.

—Sí, pero por lo que entiendo usted no lo lamenta. A veces va uno mucho más lejos de lo que pensaba. Cada cual debe usar su influencia para bien —siguió diciendo, con la bondad y el aire razonable que parecía a veces iluminarle la cara. Luego comentó, aunque no se había aludido a eso—: Conozco la espantosa historia de su madre. Me la contó él mismo cuando estuvo pasando unos días conmigo. No he oído nada que me afectara más en toda mi vida.

—Fue culpa mía que llegara a saberlo. Supongo que también se lo diría.

—Sí, pero creo que comprendió muy bien su intención. ¿Si volviera a verse en el mismo caso pensaría de otra manera?

—Pensé que iba a hacerle bien —dijo el viejo nada más.

—Y yo diría que se lo ha hecho —añadió la princesa, como si quisiera animarle.

—Yo no sé qué era lo que tenía entonces en la cabeza. Quería enemistarle con la sociedad. Ahora quiero reconciliarle —dijo mister Vetch con vehemencia. Parecía dar a entender que eso le importaba muchísimo.

—¡Pero si ya lo está! —contestó ella—. Hablamos muchas veces de eso. Él no es como yo, que veo toda

suerte de abominaciones. Es un aristócrata presumido. ¿Qué más puede querer usted?

—Ésas no son las opiniones que me comunica a *mí* —dijo mister Vetch moviendo la cabeza tristemente —. Estoy apenadísimo y no acabo de entenderlo. No he venido aquí con la pretensión de examinarla, pero me gustaría mucho saber si me equivoco al creer que ha ido con usted a los peores barrios, a Saint Giles y a White Chapel.

—Sí, desde luego hemos ido juntos a hacer algunas investigaciones —admitió la princesa—, y debajo de esta ciudad tan enorme, con todo su lujo, su derroche y su vicio, hemos visto ejemplos de miseria y de horror que no pueden ni imaginarse. Pero no hemos ido únicamente a los suburbios; también hemos estado en un *music-hall* y en otros entretenimientos baratos.

El violinista, al principio, recibió la información en silencio, de modo que la princesa continuó relatando algunas de las cosas que había visto, y describiendo con gran viveza, aunque con cierta moderación argumentativa, varias escenas de las que hacían poco honor a «nuestra cacareada civilización».

—¿Qué tiene de extraño entonces que me diga que las cosas no pueden seguir como hasta ahora? —preguntó el violinista, después de oírla—. El otro día, sin ir más lejos, me dijo que se consideraría uno de los seres más despreciables si no hiciera algo por cambiar las cosas, por mejorarlas.

—¡Claro!, ¿qué puede tener de extraño? Pero si dijo eso era que tenía un mal día —comentó la princesa —. Cambia continuamente, y sus impresiones cambian también. No es en la miseria del pueblo en lo que piensa siempre. Usted me cuenta lo que le ha dicho; bueno, pues a mí me ha dicho que ya puede morirse el pueblo antes de sacrificar en su honor las conquistas de la civilización. En esos momentos, dice que perecerían, que no quedaría rastro de ellas si las masas ignorantes llegaran a estar arriba.

—No necesita tener miedo. Eso no ocurrirá nunca.

—No lo sé. Podemos intentarlo al menos —dijo ella.

—Intente usted lo que quiera, señora; pero, por amor de Dios, sáqueme al chico de este lío.

La princesa se había excitado de repente al hablar de la causa en que creía y, de momento, no hizo caso de esa llamada que mister Vetch había hecho con una gran ansiedad. Levantó la cabeza, y la luz de sus ojos adquirió un extraordinario esplendor:

—¿Sabe lo que le digo al señor Robinson cuando me hace observaciones como ésa? Le pregunto qué es lo que entiende por civilización. Vamos a esperar primero a que llegue, y luego hablaremos de ella. De momento, y en vista de todos esos horrores, la desprecio y reniego de ella.

Se rió de todas las cosas habidas y por haber; podría haber pasado por una espléndida sirena de la revolución.

—El mundo es muy triste y odioso, y me alegro mucho de ir a dejarlo pronto. Pero antes de irme quiero salvar a Hyacinth —insistió mister Vetch—. Si es un aristócrata presumido, como usted dice, menos a propósito será para llevarle a su molino. Si resulta que ni siquiera cree en lo que pretende hacer, ¡vaya bonita situación! ¿A qué se dedica entonces, señora? ¿Qué endiablada estupidez es la que ha emprendido?

—Es una mezcla especial de impulsos contradictorios —dijo la princesa, pensativa. Luego, como si volviera a la pregunta del viejo, añadió—: ¿Cómo voy a discutir yo sus asuntos con usted? ¿Cómo voy a decirle sus secretos? En primer lugar, no los conozco y, si lo supiera… ¡imagínese!

Su visitante dio un largo suspiro, casi un lamento de desconcierto y desánimo. Le había dicho antes que viéndola comprendía muy bien que el joven se hubiera vuelto su esclavo, pero lo que no podía decirle era que comprendía sus motivos y secretos y que aprobaba toda la anormalidad de su conducta. Tenía la impresión de que era una mujer hermosa, pero perversa; una mezcla femenina mucho más complicada que las que él había tratado hasta entonces, y se sentía desalentado, perdido y condenado al fracaso. Iba preparado a halagarla sin escrúpulos, creyendo que ése era el mejor camino de tratar con ella; pero se encontraba con que esas artes primitivas, aunque pareciera extraño, no eran las más indicadas para su modo de ser, y su desconcierto aumentaba en vez de disminuir al ver que ella, al menos, se esforzaba por ser comprensiva. Había dejado el sombrero en el suelo, y tenía las manos en el puño del paraguas, un paraguas que hacía mucho tiempo que había renunciado a plegarse bien. Estaba un poco hundido, con la barbilla apoyada en las manos.

—¿Por qué sigue esa conducta? ¿Por qué cree semejantes cosas? —preguntó; pero estaba convencido de que lo hacía en un tono débil y que no serviría para nada.

—Señor mío, ¿cómo sabe usted lo que yo creo? A pesar de todo, tengo mis razones, que serían muy largas de explicar, y que además no le interesarían demasiado. Cada uno debe ver la vida como puede; y no hay duda de que se nos presenta por distintos caminos. Usted me cree una persona afectada, y piensa que todo lo que hago no es más que una *pose*; pero lo único que intento es ser natural. ¿Usted mismo no es también un poco inconsecuente? —preguntó con aquella condenada dulzura que dejaba helado a mister

Vetch y le hacía comprender que no iba a sacar nada de ella—. No quiere que nuestro amigo se asome a las miserias de Londres, porque eso despierta su sentido de la justicia. Pues es una cosa bien rara no querer despertar el sentido de la justicia en una persona a quien se quiere y a quien se estima.

—Si no me importa un pito su sentido de la justicia, no me importan un pito las miserias de Londres; y si yo fuera joven, y guapo, y listo, y brillante, y con una gran posición como usted, me importaría mucho menos todavía. En ese caso tendría muy poco que decirle a un pobre obrero, a un chiquillo que se gana la vida con un bote de cola y unas tiras de cuero viejo.

—No lo desfigure; no pretenda que es lo que sabe muy bien que no es —dijo la princesa con su desconcertante sonrisa—. Sabe usted de sobra que es el hombrecillo más civilizado que hay.

El violinista se sentía desconsolado:

—Yo lo único que quiero es defenderle… librarle. —Luego añadió—: No la entiendo a usted muy bien. ¿Si le gusta porque es un chico de clase baja, cómo puede gustarle porque es un presumido?

Ella se quedó mirando el fuego, como si ese pequeño problema mereciera cierta consideración, y luego siguió:

—Querido mister Vetch, estoy segura de que no quiere ser impertinente, pero algunas de las cosas que dice producen ese resultado. No hay nada que le moleste a uno más que ver que ponen en duda su sinceridad. Yo no tengo que darle explicaciones. A mis amigos les pido que confíen en mí, y a los demás que me dejen en paz. Aparte de eso, cualquier cosa poco amable que pueda haberme dicho, descontada la inevitable torpeza, no será nada comparada con el chaparrón de insultos que estoy preparada a recibir dentro de poco. Voy a hacer cosas que producirán una buena cosecha, ¡vaya si voy a hacer cosas, señor mío! Y estoy decidida a no preocuparme. Por tanto, ¡venga, hombre, serénese! Si los dos nos interesamos tanto por Robinson, no puedo comprender por qué vamos a pelearnos por él.

—Querida señora —se disculpó el viejo—, no tengo la menor intención de faltarle al respeto o de agotar su paciencia, y debe perdonarme si no cuido mucho mis maneras. ¿Cómo voy a hacerlo si estoy tan obsesionado? Bien sabe Dios que no quiero pelearme. Le digo que lo único que quiero es ver libre a Hyacinth.

—¿Libre de qué? —preguntó la princesa.

—Pues de alguna maldita hermandad secreta o liga internacional a la que pertenece, y que sólo pensarlo no me deja dormir por las noches. Es justo el tipo de chico para que se aprovechen de él.

—Sus temores parecen muy vagos.

—Esperaba que me dijera usted el capítulo y el versículo.

—¿En qué se basan sus sospechas? ¿Qué fundamentos tiene usted? —insistió ella.

—Tengo muchos; ninguno de ellos muy claro, pero todos significan algo: su aspecto, su manera de hablar, todo lo que me choca en él. Querida señora, esas cosas se sienten, se adivinan. ¿Conoce a ese pobre charlatán infatuado, Eustache Poupin, que trabaja en el mismo sitio que Hyacinth? Es un viejo amigo mío y un buen hombre, para como suelen ser los charlatanes. Pero se pasa la vida conspirando, y escribiendo y pulsando cuerdas que hacen un poco de ruido, y lo toma por el toque de difuntos de la sociedad. No tiene por qué quejarse y le va estupendamente. Pero se empeña en que las personas sean iguales, ¡Dios le valga!; y supongo que en cuanto haya conseguido que sean iguales fundará una sociedad para dejar a todas las estrellas del cielo del mismo tamaño. No es serio, aunque cree que es el único ser humano que nunca toma las cosas en broma; y todas sus maquinaciones, que a mí me parecen inocentes, son para él una costumbre y una tradición, como su teoría de que Cristóbal Colón, que descubrió América, era francés, y lo del baño de pies caliente el sábado por la noche. No me ha confesado que Hyacinth se haya comprometido en serio a hacer algo por la causa que pudiera tener consecuencias desagradables, pero la forma en que desvía la idea me resulta tan inquietante como si lo hubiera hecho. Él y su mujer están muy encariñados con el chico, pero no acaban de decidirse a intervenir; claro que quizá les pase lo que a mí: que no ven manera de hacerlo. No fui yo quien le enseñó esos endiablados trucos, aunque quizá sí que lo hice al principio. Cuanto más bonito sea el trabajo, mayor será el privilegio de hacerlo; pero los Poupin tienen aspiraciones socialistas para el chico, y no descansarán hasta proporcionarle una noble oportunidad. Yo he acudido a ellos por las buenas, y me aseguran que no hay un pelo de su cabeza que no sea para ellos tan sagrado como si fuera hijo suyo. Pero eso tampoco me consuela demasiado, por la sencilla razón de que creo que la vieja (cuya abuela no me cabe duda de que llevó cabezas ensangrentadas clavadas en una pica en París) sería capaz de cortársela a su propio hijo con tal de hacer algún daño a los propietarios. Además, dicen, que qué influencia tienen ellos ya sobre Hyacinth. Si es un descarriado, adora dioses falsos. En resumen, que no me dan ninguna información, y que me atrevería a decir que ellos mismos están atados por algún juramento poco santo. Pueden temer una venganza si andan con cuentos. Todo eso no es más que basura, pero esa

basura puede ser un motivo muy serio.

La princesa escuchaba con atención y procuraba seguirle con paciencia:

—No me hable de los franceses; nunca me han importado.

—Pues parece raro si es usted socialista. Tendría que estar de acuerdo con ellos.

—¿Por qué me llama socialista? Odio todas esas etiquetas y banderines —dijo. Luego preguntó—: ¿Pero qué supone del señor Robinson? Porque tiene que suponer algo.

—Pues que haya podido echarse a cuestas el maldito encargo de hacer alguna idiotez… algo en lo que ni él mismo cree.

—No tengo ni idea de qué clase de cosa puede hablar. Pero si no cree en ella, puede dejarla muy fácilmente.

—¿Cree usted que es hombre capaz de renegar de algo que hubiera prometido en serio? —preguntó el violinista.

La princesa expresó sus dudas:

—No se puede juzgar nunca a la gente hasta haberla puesto a prueba. ¿Se ha tomado siquiera la molestia de preguntarle a él?

—¿De qué iba a servirme? No me diría nada. Sería como un hombre que avisa cuándo va a batirse en duelo.

La princesa permaneció unos momentos callada, y miró a mister Vetch con una sonrisa indulgente y compasiva:

—Estoy segura de que se está preocupando por lo que no es más que una sombra; pero eso no puede evitarse, ¿verdad? No acabo de ver cómo puedo ayudarle.

—Pero ¿quiere usted que cometa alguna atrocidad, cualquier locura? —suplicó mister Vetch.

—Señor mío, yo no quiero que haga nada de nada. No he tenido la menor relación con ninguna clase de compromiso que haya podido contraer. Hágame el honor de confiar en mí —dijo la princesa con cierta sequedad—. No comprendo qué haya podido hacer para perder su confianza. Confíe también un poco en el chico. Es un caballero y se comportará como tal.

El violinista se levantó, y se puso a frotar su sombrero con el puño del abrigo. Daba pena verle allí sin saber qué hacer, como si tuviera que decir algo más pero pensara que debía marcharse, y como si sobre ambas ideas prevaleciera alguna otra más extraña:

—Eso es precisamente lo que me da miedo —dijo por fin. Luego la miró y añadió—: Pero la vida tiene que gustarle mucho.

La princesa fingió no comprender la insinuación encerrada en esas palabras:

—Déjemelo a mí, déjemelo a mí. Siento mucho que esté tan preocupado, pero le agradezco que haya venido a verme. Ha sido muy interesante, porque es una de las personas que han influido en nuestro amigo.

—Sí, desgraciadamente. Si no hubiera sido por mí no habría conocido a Poupin, y si no hubiese conocido a Poupin no habría conocido a ese amigo químico (¿cómo se llama?). Muniment.

—¿Y cree usted que eso le ha hecho daño? —preguntó la princesa, que también se había levantado.

—Sin duda alguna: ese chico reconcentrado ha sido la causa principal de la infección.

—¡Agota usted mi paciencia! —contestó ella, y se volvió.

Verdaderamente, la insistencia del violinista era irritante. Continuó sin saber qué hacer, con la cabeza inclinada hacia delante y los brazos colgando, con el sombrero y el paraguas sostenidos de una forma grotesca, como si quisiera ilustrar la cosa o darle mayor énfasis.

—Durante mucho tiempo he supuesto que tenían que ser Muniment o usted los que le habían metido en ese lío. Sospechaba más de usted… mucho más; pero si no es usted, tiene que ser él.

—¡Entonces más valdría que fuera a buscarle!

—Claro que iré. No le conozco apenas, no le he visto más que una vez, pero le hablaré con toda claridad.

La princesa llamó a la doncella para que acompañase a mister Vetch, pero en el momento en que él ponía la mano en la puerta de la habitación le detuvo con decisión:

—Mire, ahora que lo pienso, haga el favor de no ir a casa del señor Muniment. Es mejor dejarle tranquilo. Déjemelo a mí —terminó con una sonrisa más amable.

—¿Por qué no?, ¿por qué no? —repetía él. Y como ella no acabara de decidirse a decirle por qué no, preguntó—: ¿No lo sabe?

—No, no lo sabe; no tiene nada que ver con eso.

De repente había sentido el deseo de proteger a Paul Muniment de la culpa que le imputaba mister Vetch, y que significaba una responsabilidad muy fea: y aunque no era una persona que se molestara en

decir mentiras, esa defensa de Paul Muniment se la había encontrado en los labios antes de poder reprimirla. Fue el mismo deseo el que la llevó a decir:

—No lo haga… lo estropearía todo.

Se acercó a él muy nerviosa y le abrió ella misma la puerta:

—Déjemelo a mí, déjemelo a mí —continuó diciendo mientras el violinista la miraba asombrado y sumiso, y se dejaba poner en la calle con toda suavidad.

Estaba excitada por una idea que se le había ocurrido de repente y, después de oír que se cerraba la puerta tras mister Vetch siguió andando media hora por la habitación, muy inquieta y sin poder apartar de la cabeza esa idea.

Libro V

XXXVIII

Aquel invierno, Hyacinth tuvo mucho que hacer en sus ratos perdidos, por las noches, los días de fiesta y los momentos libres, poniéndose a trabajar en los libros que había prometido encuadernar en Medley con cubiertas que fueran dignas de la posición y el esplendor de la que era señora de su vida —tan brillantes atributos no se habían evaporado— y de la confianza y generosidad que le demostraba. Se había propuesto entregarle algo de verdadero valor, y le gustaba pensar que después de que él hubiera desaparecido los libros pasarían de mano en mano, como obras de arte, y que los entendidos se inclinarían sobre ellos y los manejarían con cuidado, entre murmullos y sonrisas. Su imaginación se despertó y le ofreció un centenar de ideas admirables, que se quedaba poniendo en ejecución hasta muy avanzada la noche. Empleó toda su habilidad, y su habilidad por entonces era ya muy grande. El viejo Crook tuvo que reconocerlo subiéndole el sueldo y, aunque entre las tradiciones del propietario del taller de Soho, que seguía llevando el mismo mandil que sus obreros, no estaba la de prodigar alabanzas, el chico supo por casualidad que varios de los libros que había hecho los había llevado a la casa de campo, donde figuraban en un estante con los tesoros de la familia, y eran exhibidos entre las amistades de los Crookenden que iban a tomar el té los domingos. El mismo Hyacinth fue incluido entre ellas en una gran ocasión: le invitaron a una reunión musical en la que conoció a media docena de señoritas Crookenden, y que pasó de pie en un rincón, detrás de una barrera de espaldas de señoras, y viendo cómo se turnaban al piano y al arpa tres o cuatro de las hijas de su patrón.

—En esta casa son terriblemente músicos —dijo una de las señoras a otra que tenía al lado; mas para Hyacinth, la impresión más clara de todo el recital de las señoritas Crookenden fue que era completamente distinto al de la princesa.

Sabía que era el único hombre del taller al que habían invitado, sin contar al encargado, que tenía sesenta años y llevaba peluca que revelaba por sí misma cierta posición social, además de ir acompañado de una mujercita furtiva y asustada que cerraba los ojos, como cegada por el resplandor, cuando la señora Crook le dirigía la palabra. Los Poupin no estaban allí, lo que no fue ninguna sorpresa para Hyacinth, sabedor de que, aunque los hubieran invitado, no habrían ido; tenían objeciones de principio ante la idea de poner los pies *chez les bourgeois*. No los habían invitado porque, a pesar del puesto que Eustache se había ganado con la prosperidad del negocio, había llegado a saberse que su mujer no acababa de ser su mujer, aunque tampoco fuera la de ningún otro; y la evidencia de esa irregularidad creía hallarse en el hecho de que jamás se la había visto más que con una camisola muy suelta. Se había temido que si iba a la villa no se presentaría con el debido número de corchetes y automáticos en el vestido, aunque Hyacinth, en dos o tres ocasiones, y especialmente la noche en que mister Vetch los llevó al teatro, había sido testigo de que podía reducir las proporciones de su figura cuando deseaba dar la impresión de que el lazo era legal.

Hyacinth no veía claro cómo había llegado a saberse en Soho la distinción que se había hecho con él, pero la verdad es que no despertó ninguna envidia, ya que Grugan, Roker y Hotchin no envidiaban más a una persona condenada a pasar una carde así que a un mono que tuviera que dar volteretas al son de un organillo: ambas cosas indicaban una educación adquirida a costa de muy duros trabajos. Pero Roker le dejó sin aliento al pegarle un codazo y decirle que ya se habría dado cuenta de que el viejo lo destinaba a una de sus niñas, y al preguntarle también qué pensaba hacer con la que se llevó a Francia, ésa a la que había tenido a champaña y langosta. Ésa fue la primera alusión que escuchó Hyacinth a la posibilidad de llegar a casarse con la hija del dueño, como los aprendices virtuosos lo hacían tradicionalmente; pero la sugerencia no acababa de convencerle ni aun después de recordar un par de incidentes que parecían darle color. Ninguna de las señoritas Crookenden le había dirigido la palabra —todas ellas tenían las piernas cortas, la cara grande y un parecido cómico con el viejo de grandes narices que era su padre— y, al contrario que las señoritas Marchant de Medley, sí sabían quién era; pero su madre, que llevaba en la cabeza más plumas que una cacatúa, formando parte de toda una estructura de cuentas de vidrio, le miraba

con una expresión caritativa casi aterradora, y le preguntó tres veces si quería tomar un vaso de carraspada.

Le resultó muy difícil llevarse los libros de la princesa; porque cuando le recordó la promesa que le había hecho en Medley de darle lodos los volúmenes que pidiera, ella contestó que las cosas habían cambiado mucho desde entonces, que ella estaba ya completamente *dépouillée*, que no aspiraba a tener una biblioteca, y que, hablando claro, podía dedicarse a otra cosa. Tenía a su disposición todos los libros de la casa; pero, como podía ver, eran ediciones muy baratas, y sería tonto malgastar tanto trabajo en ellos. Pidió ayuda a *madame* Grandoni para que le dijera al menos si no quedaban algunos libros buenos entre las cosas que la princesa había mandado al guardamuebles; ella misma le había confesado que había permitido a su doncella salvar algunas cosas del naufragio y embarcarlas en un capitoné. Todo eso había sido obra de Assunta, que había suplicado una y otra vez que guardaran algo que podría ser el pan de su vejez; pero la propia princesa se había lavado las manos. *Madame* Grandoni se limitó a contestar: «*Chè, chè*, estoy segura de que hay un poco de todo en esas cajas», y Hyacinth acudió a Assunta, que acogió la idea con su simpatía y expresividad italianas y prometió pescar para él todo lo que encontrara impreso. Llegó un día a casa de Hyacinth en un coche de alquiler y con un montón de libros y, al preguntarle de dónde los había sacado, se pasó el dedo por delante de la nariz, en un ademán muy expresivo. Se los fue llevando a la princesa a medida que los terminaba, pero el recibimiento que les hacía era mover la cabeza y sonreír con cierta tristeza:

—Es muy bonito, no cabe duda, pero he perdido ya el gusto por estas cosas. Además no debes olvidar que me dijiste una vez que una mujer, por muy refinada que fuera, era incapaz de distinguir una encuadernación buena de una mala. Recuerdo que me dijiste que varias señoras elegantes habían llevado al taller trozos de cuero, pretendiendo que se hiciera una imitación. Desde luego, esas diferencias no son las que más aprecio. Hijo mío, esas cosas ya no me dicen nada; no dudo de que son muy bonitas, pero me dejan fría. ¿Qué quieres que le haga? No se puede servir a Dios y a las riquezas.

Sus pensamientos estaban puestos en cosas que no tenían nada que ver con las encuadernaciones delicadas, y era evidente que le parecía que Hyacinth, al preocuparse tanto por esas cosas, recordaba la locura del emperador romano que se dedicaba a tocar la lira mientras ardía Roma. En su opinión, la sociedad europea estaba también en llamas, y no había ocupación frívola que pudiera emocionarla tanto como contemplar ese espectáculo. Algunas veces provocaba demostraciones de hilaridad, de alegría y esperanza, pero estaban siempre relacionadas, de un modo u otro, con la vida del pueblo. Cuando fue con Hyacinth a un *music-hall* de Edgware Road lo hizo para ver al pueblo, y todos los pasatiempos y excursiones de aquel invierno estuvieron guiados por su interés por las clases a quienes iban destinados los cambios fundamentales.

Lo de preguntarle si lo tomaba en serio era algo que ya había pasado a la historia y, en realidad, llegar a alguna convicción sobre ese punto había dejado de tener mucha importancia. Le bastaba con que fuera como era, superficial o profunda y, en todo caso, el propósito que la animaba era lo bastante serio para traer consecuencias. Algunas de esas consecuencias podían resultar muy graves, aunque ella fuera superficial y había veces en que la princesa no dejaba de preocuparse mucho por ellas. Los domingos, cuando había ido con él a los lugares más tenebrosos, a los rincones más fétidos de Londres, siempre había llevado con ella abundante cantidad de dinero, y se lo había dejado en todos esos sitios. Decía con toda naturalidad que no se podía ir a mirar al pueblo sólo por sacar alguna impresión y sin pagarles por ello, y soltaba limosnas a derecha e izquierda, sin discriminación, sin pararse a preguntar nada, como lo hubiera hecho la abadesa de un convento asediado por los mendigos, o la señora pudiente de siglos pasados que se dedicaba a repartir dádivas con la esperanza de ganar el cielo. Hyacinth no le decía nunca, aunque lo pensara algunas veces, que puesto que estaba tan imbuida por la idea moderna de la caridad debía también administrarla con un sentido moderno, de acuerdo con los principios de la ciencia económica; sabía que no era una mujer a quien se pudiera dirigir o dar normas, podía entender las ideas de los demás, pero nunca seguir su forma de actuar. Además, ¿qué importaba? ¿Qué podía importarle a él adoptar los métodos buenos o los desacertados si le quedaba tan poco tiempo para apenarse o estar contento? La princesa era la encarnación de una pasión, no un sistema; y su conducta se encaminaba más a remediarse a sí misma que a remediar a los otros. Aparte de eso, la miseria se agolpaba de tal forma en su camino que, dondequiera que dejara caer el dinero, encontraba siempre unas ávidas manos dispuestas a agarrarlo. Le extrañaba que tuviera todavía tanto dinero disponible, hasta que le explicó que lo conseguía gracias a unas tremendas economías en su propio tren de vida. Lo que daba eran sus ahorros, el margen que había conseguido crear; y ya que había probado la satisfacción de atesorar pequeñas cantidades con ese propósito, miraba los años de despilfarro y ociosidad, cuando sólo tenía motivos personales como un largo y estúpido sueño de la conciencia. Hacer algo por los demás no era sólo mucho más humano, ¡era muchísimo más divertido!

Conducida por Hyacinth, hizo las más extrañas amistades; escuchó las historias más extraordinarias y formó sobre ellas y sobre las personas que las narraban unas teorías que resultaban con frecuencia más extraordinarias todavía. Se encaprichó por varios vagabundos de uno y otro sexo, intentó establecer relaciones sociales con ellos, y fue causa de infinitas preocupaciones para el caballero que vivía al lado de su casa, en Crescent, el que estaba siempre fumando en la ventana y que a Hyacinth le recordaba a mister Micawber. Recibía visitas que eran el escándalo del barrio, y Hyacinth llegó a abandonar sus deberes, fueran los que fueran, por ver quién era el próximo pordiosero que llegaba a su puerta. Es verdad que todas aquellas relaciones fueron haciéndose más fructíferas a medida que aumentaba su intimidad con *lady* Aurora; su señoría establecía algunas discriminaciones que la princesa tuvo que aceptar, y antes de terminar el invierno, los servicios del señor Robinson en los suburbios fueron juzgados innecesarios. Él se los traspasó a *lady* Aurora con verdadero alivio, porque en los cuatro meses anteriores no había acabado de comprender nunca por qué hacía aquello ni se había tomado en serio su papel de *cicerone*. Se había lanzado a un mar de barbarie, sin tener ninguna energía civilizadora que ofrecer. Comprendía que el pueblo era cruelmente desgraciado; pensaba a veces que lo comprendía mejor que ellos mismos, pues con mucha frecuencia se quedaba asombrado ante su brutal insensibilidad, su ordinariez impermeable a probar cosas mejores o a sentir algún deseo de tenerlas. Lo conocía ya tan bien, que el contacto repetido no podía añadir mayor viveza a sus convicciones; más bien ahogaba y nublaba su impresión, la llenaba de contradicciones y dificultades, le impedía reaccionar, y le daba la sensación de que era algo inevitable que no se podía vencer. En esos momentos, la pobreza y la ignorancia de la multitud parecían tan enormes y preponderantes, eran hasta tal punto ley de vida, que quienes se las habían arreglado para escapar de aquel negro abismo eran sólo los afortunados, los espíritus con recursos y también los niños mimados de la suerte; hasta cierto punto, inspiraban el interés y la simpatía que uno podría sentir por los supervivientes y los vencedores, por los que habían vuelto sanos y salvos del naufragio o de la batalla. La idea que prevalecía en la mente de Hyacinth, y de la que cada una de las pulsaciones de su tiempo constituía una sílaba, era que la ola de la democracia estaba apoderándose del mundo; que se llevaría por delante todas las tradiciones del pasado; que fuera lo que fuera lo que no acertara a traer, sí llevaría al menos en su seno una energía magnífica, y que podía confiarse en que sabría cuidarla. Cuando esa marea salvadora cubriese el mundo y flotara sobre la nueva era, sólo sería culpa suya (¿de quién si no?) si la necesidad, el sufrimiento y el crimen seguían siendo los ingredientes de la vida humana. Debido a su especial naturaleza, siempre dividida, a sus simpatías en eterno conflicto, y a su costumbre de fluctuar de un extremo a otro, miraba el panorama con distinto humor y con distinto interés, según los casos. A pesar del ejemplo que le ofrecía Eustache Poupin de poder reconciliar cosas muy dispares, temía que la democracia no se preocupara de las encuadernaciones perfectas ni de la conversación escogida. La princesa iba olvidando todas esas cosas a medida que avanzaba en la dirección que tan audazmente había escogido; y si la princesa podía prescindir de ellas, sería necesaria una naturaleza muy superior para conservarlas. Al mismo tiempo, era mayor el gozo y la alegría que encerraba la idea de dejarse arrastrar por la ola, de ser llevado sobre sus crestas tumultuosas e iluminadas por el sol, que la que podía encontrarse en la sequedad del esfuerzo personal. Esa visión podía llevarle a uno al éxtasis, hacerle sentirse indiferente ante su destino último, que en ese mar encrespado sería probablemente ir a parar a las profundidades o estrellarse contra las rocas. Hyacinth comprendía que lo mismo si su simpatía terminaba por inclinarse a favor de los vencidos o de los vencedores, la fuerza victoriosa era potencialmente infinita, y no necesitaría el testimonio de los irresolutos.

El lector sonreirá ante tantas oscilaciones y debates mentales y no comprenderá por qué un encuadernador bastardo daba tanta importancia a sus conclusiones. No eran importantes para ninguna de las dos causas, pero sí importantes para él aunque sólo sirvieran para librarle del tormento que era su vida y del golpe doloroso que recibía de rebote. No encontraba paz entre las dos corrientes que llevaba en su naturaleza: la sangre plebeya de su madre y la del lord aristocrático y supercivilizado. Seguían zarandeándole de un lado a otro; le ponían en pie de guerra contra sí mismo. Tenía una gran ambición: quería nada menos que llegar a conocer la verdad y conservarla en su corazón. Con la inocencia de su juventud, creía que era algo tan brillante y bien tallado como un diamante; pero hacia cualquier parte que se volviera en su deseo de encontrarla parecía estar seguro de que, detrás de él, inclinada con un gesto de reproche había una cara trágica y herida. El recuerdo de su madre había llenado la fermentación vaga de sus primeros impulsos hacia la crítica social; pero desde que el problema se había hecho más complejo, al resultarle cada vez más queridas muchas de las cosas que veía en el mundo, había ido tratando de formarse una idea de su padre más fácil de concebir, de dotarla de alguna expresión de honor, de ternura, de sufrimiento inmerecido o, al menos, de una meritoria expiación. Abandonar una de esas dos presencias en favor de la otra era algo que le parecía una vergüenza, una verdadera traición, pues casi le parecía oír la

voz de su padre, que le preguntaba si era la conducta que correspondía a un caballero abrazar las opiniones de los fanáticos y emular los actos de la gente de mal vivir. Ya había abandonado la idea de que no era su padre el más indicado para hablar de lo que debía hacer un caballero, de que el bribón más grande de Londres no habría merecido menos consideración. Había dado paso a todas las concesiones, interpretaciones e hipótesis que permitía la evidencia de lo que había leído en *The Times* una tarde memorable. Aunque los momentos de resentimiento contra el hombre que le había cargado con el estigma que había de llevar toda su vida habían sido frecuentes, y hasta demasiado frecuentes, se lanzó en otras condiciones, y con cierto éxito, a buscar excusas y condonaciones filiales. No le resultaba demasiado difícil considerarse hijo de una francesa ligera de cascos, pero se le hacía más difícil que su padre fuera un noble que carecía de nobleza. Era algo que no se veía capaz de afrontar. Algunas veces sacrificaba en su imaginación a uno de los autores de sus días en favor del otro, generalmente a lord Frederick; otras veces, cuando fallaba la teoría de que su padre habría hecho grandes cosas por él de haber vivido, o cuando se venía abajo la suposición de que había sido el único amante de Florentine Vivier, los maldecía y descartaba a ambos; otras veces se los imaginaba unidos, mirándole con ojos infinitamente tristes, pero sin vergüenza alguna, ojos que parecían decirle que habían sido desgraciadísimos, no infames. Sus peores momentos, como lo habían sido siempre, eran aquellos en los que no encontraba motivos para creer que lord Frederick hubiera sido su padre. Hay que decir que esos momentos pasaban pronto, pues no podía encontrarle otra explicación a la incorregible y atormentadora mezcla que llevaba en su persona.

No menciono todas esas cavilaciones de Hyacinth porque se hubieran hecho más intensas durante el invierno que la princesa pasó en Madeira Crescent, sino porque eran un elemento constante en su vida y hay que recordarlas para comprenderle. Había momentos en aquellas noches de noviembre y diciembre, en las que caminaba por las sucias calles que se extienden entre Westminster y Paddington, abriéndose camino entre la luz mortecina de las farolas y mascando el sabor a humo de la niebla, en que se sentía más feliz que nunca. La influencia permeable de Londres se había apoderado otra vez de él; París, Milán y Venecia se habían desvanecido y eran sólo un recuerdo y, cuando la gran ciudad que era más suya que ninguna, se extendía alrededor bajo el sudario de niebla, como un inmenso monstruo jadeante, tenía la vaga sensación, que había tenido antes, pero que veía luego con más claridad, de que era la expresión más rica de la vida del hombre que existía. Su horizonte se había ensanchado mucho, pero volvía a estar lleno del espacio que enviaba oscuros destellos y emanaciones, y reflejos extraños y borrosos hacia un cielo sin estrellas. Dejaba en suspenso su sensibilidad en medio de él, para vibrar de alegría y esperanza y sentir la ambición y al mismo tiempo el valor de renunciar a todo. Entre aquella inmensidad oscura, el hogar tranquilo de la princesa brillaba con seguridad más profunda, con una intimidad mayor; su imagen le acompañaba siempre, y las relaciones con su dueña estaban mejor organizadas. Fuera o no mejor para la causa que defendía la simplicidad a que se había reducido, al menos sí era mejor para el pobre señor Robinson. Le hacía a ella más próxima y a él más libre; y de haber existido el peligro de que llegara a tomar el tono de las cosas vulgares que la rodeaban, no necesitaba más que recordarla en Medley para restaurar el efecto. Su belleza parecía encontrar siempre el medio que mejor se acomodaba a ella, empapaba todo lo que la rodeaba y, en medio de las cosas más corrientes, constituía una especie de esplendor. Al adoptar ella algunas de las condiciones propias de las horribles masas de Londres, la naturaleza daba énfasis a lo difícil, a lo que parecía imposible. Hyacinth solía reírse de esas pretensiones cuando iba por la noche a Paddington o volvía andando a casa; se encontraba en el camino con los componentes de esas masas, y se preguntaba por qué arte de magia no llegarían a elevarse. Eran noches en las que todas las personas que encontraba parecían apestar a ginebra y suciedad, y en las que se codeaba con hombres tan repelentes como un leproso. Sobre todo algunas mujeres y chicas resultaban aterradoras, atiborradas de alcohol y de vicio, brutales, zarrapastrosas, obscenas. «¿Qué remedio puede haber como no sea otro diluvio, qué alquimia que no sea la aniquilación?», se preguntaba mientras iba por la calle; y le hubiera gustado saber qué destino le estaría reservado a un planeta que era semejante gusanera o qué redención podía tener si no era lanzarle una bola de fuego que lo consumiera todo. Si era culpa de los ricos, como sostenía Paul Muniment, de los ricos congestionados y egoístas que permitían que florecieran tales abominaciones, no había diferencia alguna, de no ser una vergüenza aún mayor; puesto que el globo terrestre, un patente fracaso, producía lo mismo la causa que el efecto.

A Hyacinth no se le ocurría pensar que la princesa le hubiera retirado su confianza por haberse puesto en manos de *lady* Aurora para seguir adelante con su tarea de investigar las condiciones de los pobres. No podía sentir celos de la aristocrática solterona; sentía demasiado respeto por su filantropía, por el completo conocimiento y la capacidad que tenía para contestar cualquier pregunta extemporánea que se le pasara por la cabeza a la princesa, y también una conciencia muy aguda de lo inconstantes y superficiales que eran sus

propios puntos de vista sobre esa cuestión. Le bastaba con saber que el saloncito de Madeira Crescent era un sitio en el que siempre podía pensar, y al que sus pasos podían dirigirse con una sensación de seguridad y privilegio nunca desmentida. Ese cuadro estaba siempre ante sus ojos, aunque la mitad de las veces logrado por el sentimiento de unos colores que no correspondían literalmente a la realidad. Hacía mucho tiempo que sus relaciones con la princesa habían dejado de pertenecer al mundo de la fábula; eran tan naturales como cualquiera otra cosa, ya que todas las cosas eran de sobra extrañas; eran algo que había asimilado y también una parte indispensable de la felicidad de los dos. «De los dos», Hyacinth se atrevía a decirlo, pues no había vanidad alguna en ver que la mujer más notable de Europa le quería también mucho con toda naturalidad. La acogida familiar que le esperaba allí en las noches desapacibles del invierno era prueba de ello. Se sentaban juntos, como viejos amigos a quienes no les importan los silencios, mientras se miran con ojos que pueden entenderse sin hablar. Y los silencios no eran lo más frecuente, pues sólo aparecían después de haber hablado mucho. Hyacinth, sentado al otro lado de la chimenea, tenía a veces la sensación de haberse casado con ella: tantas eran las cosas que se daban por sabidas entre ellos. Para esa clase de trato, íntimo, natural, gracioso, limitado por las cortinas corridas y las lámparas a media luz, y salpicado de confidencias y comentarios domésticos, que siempre tendían a la comicidad, la princesa resultaba incomparable. Ella decía que su existencia en aquellos momentos era como un día de campo, pero que todos los accidentes eran accidentes felices. Había una tranquilidad hogareña en todos sus gestos y pasos, en su forma de sentarse, de escuchar, de jugar con el gato o de atender el fuego, o en la de doblar el chal ubicuo de *madame* Grandoni; y, más que nada, en su costumbre de pasar las noches en casa, sin salir nunca a cenar o ir a alguna reunión ni preocuparse de las diversiones de Londres. Había algo en el aislamiento de la habitación, cuando el cazo del agua estaba en la repisa de la chimenea, y le había dado a la doncella el paraguas mojado, y la princesa le hacía sentarse en un sitio determinado junto al fuego —el mejor para secarse los zapatos—; había algo que le traía a la memoria la *vie de province* que conocía por las novelas francesas. Recordaba el término francés porque era el que expresaba mejor el tono de la compañía de la princesa, y la cultura y la facilidad que había en su conversación. Ella misma empleaba con frecuencia la lengua francesa; le iba mejor para expresar ciertos matices, aunque ya le había dicho a Hyacinth que tenía su propia opinión latina y poco favorable del pueblo que lo hablaba. Desde luego, su conversación no tenía nada de provinciana, era muy libre y nada tímida; no había nada que no pudiera decírsele o que no estuviera dispuesta a decir ella misma. Había prescindido de prejuicios y no hacía el menor caso de los avisos convencionales de peligro. Hyacinth se admiraba al ver la facilidad —creía verla con los ojos— con que podía abrir las ventanas a toda corriente intelectual. Había un encanto extraordinario en aquella mezcla de libertad y de humildad, en ver a una criatura que era capaz de emprender los vuelos más audaces, sentada como una paloma y con las alas plegadas.

Hyacinth encontró varias veces a *lady* Aurora en Madeira Crescent —durante el día, lo mismo que él, estaba muy ocupada, y por eso iba siempre por la noche—, y sabía que su amistad con la princesa había alcanzado una gran madurez. Las dos eran una mina de interés para la otra, y las dos se alegraban de no ser distintas. La princesa pronosticaba con toda libertad que iba a abandonarla cualquier día —todas las personas agradables lo hacían— pero, de acuerdo con lo que el joven podía observar, el loco entusiasmo de su señoría no daba muestras de agotarse. Estaba asombrada, pero fascinada también; creía que su amiga extranjera era no sólo la más distinguida, la más sorprendente y la más original del mundo, sino la persona más divertida y agradable para ir a tomar el té con ella. En cuanto a la propia princesa, lo que sentía ante *lady* Aurora era lo mismo que había sentido Hyacinth: la tenía por una santa, la primera que había visto en su vida, y el ejemplo más puro que pudiera imaginarse; tan buena, a su modo, como san Francisco de Asís, tan compasiva, tan transparente y tan poco común como él, y con un espíritu de caridad igualmente sublime. Pensaba que cuando uno encontraba una flor como ésa en los caminos polvorientos del mundo, debía echarle mano y conservarla; y se pasaba la vida respirando la fragancia de *lady* Aurora, besándola y cogiéndole la mano. La solterona estaba aterrada ante su generosidad, ante la forma en que su imaginación fantaseaba; trataba de convencerla —lo mismo que la princesa hacía por su lado— de que esas exageraciones acababan con el desgraciado asunto que los ocupaba. A la princesa le encantaban sus vestidos, la forma en que se los ponía y los llevaba, las economías que hacía para sacar dinero para sus limosnas, y la pasmosa ingenuidad con que conseguía estirar sus menguados recursos. Deseaba emularla en todas esas particularidades, aprender a economizar de una manera aún más ingeniosa, comprarse los sombreros en la misma tienda, preocuparse tan poco como ella de que los guantes no se ajustaran bien, y preguntar en el mismo tono: «¿No es un fastidio que al marido de Susan Crotty le hayan dejado en libertad vigilada?». Decía que *lady* Aurora le hacía sentirse como una sombrerera francesa, y que si había algo que ella odiara en el mundo era una sombrerera francesa. Las dos se veían afectadas por el modo de ser de la

otra, y las dos deseaban que la otra no cambiase, al mismo tiempo que cada una de ellas se transformaba en la imagen de su amiga.

Una noche en que iba a Madeira Crescent un poco más tarde de lo habitual se encontró con la peregrina de Belgrave Square, que acababa de salir de la casa. Tenía un aire muy distinto del que le había conocido siempre, estaba sofocada y un poco nerviosa, como si hubiera recibido un montón de malas noticias. Le saludó con un «¿Cómo está usted?» y con su acostumbrada risita, pero siguió su camino sin pararse a hablar con él. Tres minutos más tarde le dijo a la princesa que la había encontrado y ella contestó:

—Es una lástima que no hayas venido un poco antes. Habrías presenciado una escena.

—¿Una escena? —preguntó él, que no comprendía qué clase de violencia podía haberse producido entre dos personas que se adoraban.

—Me ha hecho una escena de lágrimas y de serias reconvenciones, con la mejor intención por supuesto. Cree que avanzo demasiado.

—Me imagino que le cuenta cosas que no me cuenta a mí —dijo Hyacinth.

—¡Huy, a ti, hijo mío! —murmuró la princesa.

Hablaba distraída, como si estuviera pensando en lo que había pasado con *lady* Aurora, y como si la inutilidad de decirle cosas al señor Robinson fuera un lugar común.

A Hyacinth eso no le importaba, pues su pretensión de ponerse a la misma altura de la princesa en esos asuntos se le había pasado. El tono que adoptaron generalmente era el de gastarse bromas, de fingir conmiseración por la locura de la una y la pusilanimidad del otro. Cuando discutía con ella exageraba deliberadamente, llevaba sus reacciones a unos extremos fantásticos, y los dos se divertían lanzándose acusaciones a la cabeza. Habían renunciado a discutir en serio y, cuando no se dedicaban a bombardearse con bromas, hablaban de cosas sobre las que no pudieran estar en desacuerdo. Había días en que ella no hacía más que hablar de su vida y de todo lo que había visto en los distintos países desde que era pequeña. Si lo que había tenido ocasión de ver era más malo que bueno, eso no disminuía el interés y la vivacidad de sus recuerdos ni el poder que tenía, el mayor que Hyacinth había conocido, para evocarlos y revivirlos. Era irreverente y envidiosa, pero le tenía pendiente de sus labios y, cuando le contaba anécdotas de las cortes extranjeras —a él le encantaba enterarse de cómo vivían y hablaban los monarcas—, pasaban horas enteras en las que nada podía indicar que a ella le hubiera gustado tomar parte en una conspiración, y que a él también le hubiera gustado verse libre de otra. Sin embargo, no dejaba de preguntarse qué sería lo que realmente estaba haciendo en semejantes tugurios, y a qué condenas podría exponerse. Cuando le preguntaba algo, contestaba que le gustaría saber qué derecho creía tener, dados sus sentimientos, para pretender que le informaran. Lo hacía pocas veces, ya que él mismo tampoco estaba muy convencido de poder hacerlo; pero, en una ocasión en que le había desafiado, contestó sonriendo, después de dudar un poco:

—Pues me parece que, con lo que le he contado, más bien debía pensar que tengo cierto derecho.

—¿Te refieres a tu famoso compromiso de «actuar» si te lo piden? De ahí no saldrá nunca nada.

—¿Por qué no?

—Porque es demasiado absurdo, demasiado vago. Parece una invención tonta de novela.

—*Vous me rendez la vie!* —exclamó Hyacinth de forma muy teatral.

—No tendrás que hacerlo —añadió ella.

—Creo que piensa que no querré hacerlo. Pero por lo menos me he ofrecido. ¿No es eso un título?

—Bueno, pues no querrás hacerlo —dijo la princesa, y los dos se miraron sin decir nada.

—Usted sí que va a hacerlo al paso que lleva.

—¿Y qué sabes tú del paso que llevo? No mereces saberlo.

Pero sí que lo sabía; sabía que estaba en comunicación con extrañas aves de paso, que tenía o creía tener muchos asuntos pendientes, y manejar algunas de las cuerdas que se pulsan en las grandes ocasiones. Recibía cartas que hacían que *madame* Grandoni la mirase de reojo y que, aunque ignorase el contenido, la llevaban a olerse el desastre, como más de una vez le había dicho a Hyacinth. *Madame* Grandoni había empezado a tener visiones muy sombrías sobre la intervención de la policía: estaba obsesionada con la idea de un registro en busca de papeles comprometedores; temía que incluso la arrastraran a ella, como cómplice de algún espantoso complot, ante algún tribunal de justicia y quizá también a la cárcel.

—¡Si los quemara siquiera!, ¡si los quemara siquiera! Pero los guarda, sé que los guarda —se lamentaba ante Hyacinth, en su total desamparo.

Apenas podía adivinar qué era lo que guardaba; y se preguntaba si estaría de veras metida en un lío, si la estarían explotando unos bandidos, aventureros voraces que contaban con que llegaría a asustarse en un momento dado y les ofrecería dinero para hacerlos callar y así salirse de una conspiración que ellos nunca

habían tomado en serio, o si lo único que hacía era coquetear con planes hipotéticos, proporcionarse sensaciones baratas, y discutir preliminares que no iban a tener segundo acto. Le habría sido fácil reírse de su idea de que estaba «muy metida», y llegar a la conclusión de que hasta las mujeres más inteligentes no saben cuándo están perdiendo el tiempo, a no ser porque no había podido olvidar la impresión sufrida por sus nervios dos años antes y de la que había hablado a la princesa en Medley, aquella sensación ardiente y nunca apagada de que las fuerzas dispuestas a dar la batalla al orden social estaban en todas partes: en el aire que respiraba, en el suelo que pisaba, en la mano de cualquier conocido al que pudiera saludar, o en los ojos de un desconocido que se posaban un momento en los suyos. Estaban arriba, abajo, dentro y fuera, en todo lo que formaba la vida; y no valía decir que resultaba muy raro que amenazaran sólo de una forma indefinida. Su fuerza residía precisamente en esa amenaza informe, y podían presentar aspectos todavía más absurdos que el de que la princesa fuera una parte de ellas, incluso cuando tanto se jactaba de serlo.

—Sí que va demasiado lejos —le había dicho la tarde en que se cruzó al llegar con *lady* Aurora.

—Naturalmente que lo hago, eso es precisamente lo que me propongo —contestó ella—. ¿Qué otra forma hay de saber si se ha llegado a donde debía llegarse? Esa pobre mujer es un ángel, pero no está nada comprometida —dijo luego.

No quiso darle más explicaciones sobre el asunto; al pedírselas él, preguntó si no había traído el libro de Browning que había quedado en traer. Si lo había traído quería que se sentara y leyera en voz alta. En un caso como ése, Hyacinth prefería no insistir; se daba por contento con no seguir hablando de la eterna pesadilla. Sacó del bolsillo *Hombres y mujeres* y estuvo leyendo veinte minutos; pero al comentar unos de los poemas al final de la lectura, comprendió que su compañera no había prestado atención. Cuando la acusó de no haber escuchado, contestó mirándole muy pensativa:

—Después de todo, ¿cómo puede uno ir demasiado lejos? Ésa es una frase de cobardes.

—¿Le parece que su señoría es cobarde?

—Sí, por no tener el valor de mantener sus opiniones, sus conclusiones. ¡Esa manera que tienen los ingleses de ir a hacer una cosa y quedarse luego a medio camino! —exclamó impaciente.

—Desde luego ése no es su defecto —dijo Hyacinth—. Pero a mí me parece que *lady* Aurora, por su parte, va bastante lejos también.

—Todos tenemos miedo de algunas cosas y somos muy valientes para otras.

—Lo que más miedo le da a *lady* Aurora es la princesa Casamassima —contestó Hyacinth.

Ella le miró, pero no quiso responder a esa alusión:

—Hay una cosa en la que se mostraría muy valiente. Se casaría con su amigo, tu amigo, el señor Muniment.

—¿Que se casaría con él cree usted?

—¿Pues qué si no? —preguntó la princesa—. Adora el suelo que pisa.

—¿Y qué dirían Inglefield y Belgrave Square y todo lo demás?

—Lo que ya dicen ahora, y ya ves lo poco que se conmueve. Lo haría a la primera, y eso sí merecería la pena verlo, sería algo sensacional —dijo con el entusiasmo que le producía siempre la idea de un golpe maestro.

—Eso desde luego no sería lo que llama quedarse a la mitad —comentó Hyacinth.

—Porque no sería cuestión de lógica, sería cuestión de pasión. Y cuando se trata de una cosa así, los ingleses, para hacerles justicia, no se quedan a medio camino.

Esa especulación de la princesa no era nueva para Hyacinth, que ya había pensado que después de todo no sería nada heroico, que su linajuda asociada se sintiera capaz de sacrificar su familia, su nombre y las pocas costumbres aristocráticas que le quedaban, y transformarse en escándalo y en la comidilla de ocho días en honor de Muniment: pues es sabido que el químico era en su opinión justo el tipo de hombre que podía provocar con toda facilidad cualquier trastorno, renunciación o ruptura. Pero lo que estaba menos claro era lo que opinaba Muniment de una mujer que tuviera que salirse de su clase social para casarse con él. Era seguro que se casaría algún día, porque haría todas las cosas que fueran normales, pero de momento tenía bastante que hacer con lo que llevaba entre manos y que eran cosas que le corrían más prisa. Además —Hyacinth había podido comprobarlo—, no era partidario de que la gente se saliera de la clase que le correspondía; creía que el sello que llevaba cada uno de su origen era imborrable, y que lo mejor que podía hacer era mantenerlo y luchar por él. Hyacinth podía imaginarse lo nervioso que le pondría el estar íntimamente unido a una persona que, como *lady* Aurora, luchaba en el lado contrario:

—Supongo que no puede casarse con él como no se lo pida y… a lo mejor no se lo pide.

—Sí, a lo mejor no se lo pide —repuso pensativa la princesa.

XXXIX

Los sábados por la tarde, Paul Muniment podía dejar el trabajo a las cuatro, y en una de esas ocasiones, cierto tiempo después de su visita a Madeira Crescent, se presentó a las cinco en la habitación de Rosy, vestido y peinado con todo esmero y con la piel enrojecida aún por lo mucho que se había frotado. Se quedó al pie del sofá, sonriendo a propósito, pues sabía lo que le hacía rabiar su hermana cuando se ponía una corbata nueva; la chica dejó de canturrear, como lo había estado haciendo mientras se peinaba las trenzas y, después de mirarle de arriba abajo, dijo:

Querido señor Muniment, tú vas a casa de la princesa.

—Bien, ¿y tienes algo que oponer? —preguntó el señor Muniment.

—Ni una palabra; ya sabes que me gustan las princesas. Pero tú sí que tienes algo que decir.

—Bueno, chica, pero no voy a decírtelo a ti —contestó él—. Siempre tienes algo que decir de todo, si te molestas en hacerlo.

—Pues yo sentiría muchísimo que pudiera decirse algo de mi gran hermano.

—El hombre es el único bribón del que siempre se habla bien —dijo Paul—. ¿Si no tuvieras la esperanza de que iban a ponerte verde, qué aliciente podrías tener?

—¡Ah, sí, pero no con motivo! —dijo Rosy, que siempre estaba dispuesta a discutir.

—Cuanto mejor sea el motivo, más razones hay para exponerse. Aparte de eso, no vas a oírlo… ni aunque me tiren ladrillos a la cabeza.

—¿Que no voy a oírlo? ¿No me entero de todo acaso? Me gustaría saber quién puede ocultarme a mí algo —dijo la señorita Muniment moviendo la cabeza.

—Pues yo te oculto un montón de cosas, hija —dijo Paul con cierta sequedad.

—Quieres decir que hay cosas que no quiero ni voy a molestarme en saber. Y la verdad es que las hay: cosas que no oiría por nada del mundo, que no haría por mucho que te empeñaras, ni aunque te pusieras de rodillas. Pero si lo hiciera, si lo hiciera, tan seguro que como estoy aquí, que iba a tenerlas en el bolsillo. Pero hay otras cosas —continuó la chica—, hay algunos puntos sobre los que tendrías que tener la amabilidad de informarme. Cuando la princesa te dijo que fueras a verla dijiste que no, y preguntaste que de qué iba a servirte. Yo entonces esperaba que fueras; me habría gustado que lo hicieses porque quería saber cómo vivía y si tenía cosas bonitas o sólo tan pobres como ella decía. Pero no te empujé a hacerlo, porque no podía decirte qué ibas a sacar de ello, y ese era el único bien que podía sacar yo. Ahora estoy enterada de todo por *lady* Aurora, y ya sé que todo está muy decente y muy limpito (aunque ni por asomo como corresponde a una princesa) y que sabe cómo manejarlo todo y sacar el mayor partido posible, lo mismo que yo, aunque no debiera decirlo, claro. Bien, pues ahora ya has ido, y más de una vez, y yo no he tenido nada que ver en ello; de lo cual me alegro mucho, por razones que conoces perfectamente… eres un hombre demasiado bueno para pretender que no lo sabes. Por eso, al ver que vas otra vez, te pregunto, lo mismo que tú le preguntaste a ella, ¿qué es lo que sacas yendo?

—Me gusta, hija, me gusta —dijo Paul con la sonrisa de siempre.

—Sí, me atrevería a pensarlo. A mí también me gustaría si estuviera en tu lugar, Pero es la primera vez que te oigo decir que debemos hacer siempre todo lo que nos guste.

—¿Y por qué no mientras no le hagamos daño a nadie?

—¡Ay, señor Muniment, señor Muniment! —exclamó Rosy con una solemnidad exagerada y amenazándole un poco con el índice—. No, esa mujer tan guapa y tan sensacional no te hace ningún bien a ti.

—Dale tiempo, hermana, dale tiempo —dijo Paul mirando el reloj.

—Ya veo que estás impaciente, pero tienes que escucharme. No me cabe duda de que te esperará, no vas a perder el turno. Pero haz el favor de decirme, ¿qué harías si alguien tuviera que quedar destrozado?

—Cariño mío, con tal que tú sigas bien, no me importa quien caiga.

—Pues sí, yo voy a seguir, aunque sólo sea para cuidar de mis amigos y ocuparme en que se les haga justicia a las personas buenas y sensibles que necesitan apoyo y protección. ¿De verdad se te ha olvidado que tenemos una de ésas?

El joven fue hacia la ventana con las manos en los bolsillos y miró la luz de la tarde, que ya se iba:

—¿Y por qué va ella entonces si no le gusta?

Rose Muniment vaciló un momento:

—¡Cuánto me alegro de no ser hombre! —exclamó—. Me parece que una mujer tumbada en la cama sabe más que un hombre sobre sus dos patas. ¡Y nada menos que uno como tú!

—Eres demasiado lista para mí, hija. Si va… y veinte veces por semana, ¿por qué no voy a poder ir yo una vez? Y mucho más si se tiene en cuenta que a mí me gusta, y a *lady* Aurora no.

—¿Que no le gusta a *lady* Aurora? ¿Crees que podemos llamarle hipócrita? A *lady* Aurora le entusiasma; no me dejaría decir que podría limpiarle los zapatos a la princesa. No necesito decirte lo que es capaz de hacer por las personas a quien quiere. Y tampoco creo que te importe lo más mínimo; tú tienes algo en la cabeza, algún mal negocio, y crees que va a resolvértelo ella.

Se volvió y estuvo mirándola un momento, sin dejar de sonreír y silbando de forma que apenas se le oía:

—¿Por qué no iba a importarme? ¿Acaso no soy un hombre dulce y susceptible?

—No había pensado nunca en que iba a oírte preguntar eso después de lo que he visto durante estos cuatro años. Ha estado viniendo cuatro años, y nada más que por ti; pero sin que dieras más muestras de ver lo que quería hacer que si fueras ese gato de trapo que hay encima de la alfombrilla.

—¿Y qué querías que hiciese? ¿Que me colgara de su cuello y le cogiera la mano como haces tú? —preguntó Muniment.

—Pues sí, me gustaría que lo hicieses, ya puedo decírtelo. Sería mejor que ver a la pobre señora ir poniéndose como un espejo que necesita que lo limpien.

—¿Y cómo demonios voy a limpiarla yo? Tú sabes mucho, Rosy, pero no lo sabes todo —continuó él, con cara de no ver razón alguna en lo que ella decía—. Tienes una imaginación demasiado poética, tan llena de sonidos y cuerdas de plata como una arpa antigua. No hay nada en el mundo que pueda importarme de lo que su señoría quiera hacer por mí.

—Se casaría contigo en cuanto se lo dijeras, eso es lo que haría por ti.

—Eso no me importa nada. Además, si se lo dijera, no volvería a poner los pies aquí. Y a mí me daría lo mismo, pero lo sentiría por ti.

—No te preocupes de mí; ya correré el riesgo —gritó Rosy con alegría.

—¿Y qué vamos a salir ganando si puedo tenerla para ti así, y sin ningún riesgo?

—No vas a tenerla ni para mí ni para nadie cuando se haya muerto de pena.

—¡Muerta de un ataque, sí! Y haz el favor de decirme de qué íbamos a vivir cuando ya nos tuvieras establecidos, nosotros tres y sin contar los críos.

El chico discutía únicamente por pasar el rato, pero no porque sintiera la menor curiosidad; pero su hermana replicó con la misma vehemencia que si esperara dejarle sin habla con su pregunta:

—¿Y no tiene ella cien libras al año que son suyas? ¿No conozco yo hasta el último penique de todos sus asuntos?

Paul no dio señales de juzgar las ideas de Rosy sobre un tema tan delicado; es posible que su pregunta ni siquiera le extrañara por la mezcla de motivos que había en ella. Lo único que hizo fue suspirar con paciencia y decir:

—No quiero el dinero de esa buena señora.

Su hermana, a pesar de lo impaciente que estaba, esperó unos segundos; luego le soltó de repente:

—¿Qué pasa, te gusta más la princesa?

—Si me gustara, sería mucho mejor todavía —contestó él con toda tranquilidad.

—¿Cómo podría casarse contigo? ¿No tiene ya marido?

—¡Santo Dios!, cómo me despachas —rió su hermano—. Hijas de condes, mujeres de príncipes… no tengo más que escoger.

—No hablo de la princesa mientras haya un príncipe. Pero si no te has dado cuenta de que *lady* Aurora es una excepción absolutamente maravillosa y completamente distinta a cualquier otra persona que pueda haber en el mundo entero… Bueno, ¿qué quieres que te diga? Yo sí que me he dado cuenta.

—Y yo creía que tu opinión era que los encopetados tienen que seguir siendo encopetados, y que los que están arriba deben mantenerse en su sitio —objetó Paul.

—¿Y acaso iba a perder el suyo por casarse contigo?

—Su sitio en Inglefield, desde luego —contestó de buen humor, como si quisiera demostrar que por muy pesada que se pusiera no iba a conseguir cansarle.

—¿No lo ha perdido ya? ¿Cuántas veces va allí?

—A juzgar por lo mucho que le preguntas, cualquiera diría que sí.

—Ellos piensan que está tan loca que no puede estarlo más. Ya la han dado por imposible y si se casara contigo…

—Si se casara conmigo no la tocarían ni con un palo de dos metros.

Rosy calló un momento, luego dijo con toda tranquilidad:

—Eso no me importa nada.

—Pues debiera importarte si quieres estar un poco de acuerdo con lo que dices, aunque es posible que a ella no le importe. Tienes más imaginación que lógica, cosa que, por otra parte está muy bien para una mujer. Eso es lo que te hace decir que su señoría está apenadísima porque yo voy a un sitio adonde ella va también y sin que nadie la obligue.

—Va para que no vayas tú —dijo Rosy convencida.

—¿Para que no vaya yo?

—Para interponerse entre vosotros y, en cierto sentido, para meterse en sus asuntos. Para ser amable con ella y tenerla contenta, y que no pueda cuidarse de ti.

—¿Te ha contado ella todos esos disparates? —preguntó Paul un poco asombrado ya.

—¿Necesito yo que me cuenten las cosas para saberlas? Como yo no soy un macho listo, fuerte y superior, tengo que descubrir las cosas por mí misma —dijo Rosy con una risita desafiante y con una mirada que hacía pensar si efectivamente tendría algo de bruja.

—La pintas como una mujer demasiado apasionada y demasiado calculadora a la vez —contestó el chico —. Ella no tiene sentimientos personales, no quiere nada para sí misma. No quiere más que una cosa: hacer que los pobres sean un poco menos pobres.

—Naturalmente, y por eso, a ti, que eres un solterón metepatas y desamparado, te considera uno de ellos.

—Ya sabe que no voy a estar desamparado mientras andes tú por aquí, y que mis meteduras de pata tampoco importan nada mientras estés tú para corregirlas.

—¡Quiere ayudarme a mí para ayudarte a ti después! —exclamó la joven, con la falta de respeto que ponía siempre aun en las cosas más serias; era una persona que cuando discutía parecía burlarse de sus propios argumentos—. Además, ¿no es eso lo que queréis traernos? ¿No es eso lo que estáis esperando y para lo que tanto trabajáis y conspiráis? Ella quiere meterse ahí de cabeza… para trabajar contigo.

—Hija mía, no entiende ni una palabra de lo que yo pienso. No podría hacerlo aunque quisiera.

—Y supongo que piensas que yo tampoco.

—No, tú tampoco, pero tú eres otra cosa. Tú, si quisieras, podrías hacerlo. De todas maneras, importa poco quién lo entienda o quién no lo entienda, sea lo que sea lo que pase. Yo tampoco estoy haciendo gran cosa, ya lo sabes.

Rosy le miraba desde su cama:

—No debe estar mal la cosa cuando hablas así. En fin, a mí no me importa lo que pase porque ya sé que vais a cuidarme.

—No pasará nada, no pasará nada —se limitó a decir Paul.

Y la respuesta de la joven fue decirle:

—Has cambiado de tono desde que te dedicas a la princesa.

Lo decía bastante seria, pero él fingió no darse por enterado:

—Me gusta mucho esa idea de que las señoras de la aristocracia andan peleándose por un animal tan sucio como yo.

—No sé lo sucio que estás, pero sí que hueles a jabón —continuó su infatigable hermana—. No van a pelearse; no es ése su estilo. Sí, has cambiado de tono, y todavía no puedo descubrir por qué.

—¿Qué quieres decir? ¿Cuándo he tenido yo algún tono en mi vida? —preguntó Paul.

—¿Por qué hablas entonces como si no fueras una persona extraordinaria, completamente extraordinaria, mucho más que todo lo que cualquiera, hombre o mujer, bueno o malo, aristócrata o plebeyo pueda hacer nunca por ti?

—¿Y qué he podido hacer para demostrarlo? —preguntó el joven, divertido.

—Yo no conozco tus secretos, y ése es uno de ellos. Pero los dos estamos fuera de lo corriente y muy por encima de los demás, tú y yo, y así entre nosotros, y a puerta cerrada, no hay inconveniente en que lo admitamos.

—¡Yo para ti lo admito de todo corazón! —se apresuró a decir riendo.

—Pues si yo lo admito para ti, no necesitamos más.

Los dos se contemplaron un rato en silencio, como si paladearan con gusto la distinción que se conferían mutuamente. Luego Muniment preguntó:

—Si soy un individuo tan extraordinariamente superior, ¿por qué no actuar como me corresponde?

—¡Ya lo haces, ya lo haces!

—Pero a pesar de todo no te gusta.

—No es tanto lo que tú haces. Es lo que hace *ella*.

—¿Qué quieres decir? ¿Qué es lo que hace?

—Hace sufrir a *lady* Aurora.

—¡Huy! Eso sí que no puedo con ello —dijo Paul—. Un hombre no sabe qué cara poner cuando se habla de mujeres que «sufren» por él.

—Bueno, pero si lo hacen, supongo que un hombre puede aguantarlo —contestó Rosy—. Eso es lo que *es* un hombre. Cuando se trata de sentir algo, ¡ay, es demasiado ridículo!

—Pues yo siento muchísimas cosas —admitió él con toda paciencia—. Una de ellas, que me tengas aquí chismorreando cuando quiero marcharme.

—No me importa fastidiarla un poco. ¿Lo hace a propósito?

—Las mujeres sois las que tenéis que arreglar todo eso.

Paul cepilló el sombrero con el puño del abrigo. Era un sombrero nuevo, el mejor que había tenido en su vida, y no tardó en ponérselo, como para recordar a su hermana que ya era hora de que le soltase.

—Estás precioso —dijo Rosy, contenta de verle—. No me extraña que haya perdido la cabeza. La princesa, quiero decir. Jamás habías hecho un gasto tan grande por su señoría.

—Hija mía, la princesa se lo merece, se lo merece —comentó Paul y, al parecer, con toda seriedad.

—¿Te ayudará mucho? —preguntó Rosy, que de repente mostraba una gran ansiedad.

—Bueno, eso es más bien lo que busco.

Se echó adelante en el sofá, un movimiento que hacía muy pocas veces, y exclamó, agitando las manos:

—¡Entonces, vete, vete corriendo!

Se acercó a darle un beso, como si no le extrañara más que otras veces verla cambiar de un modo tan absurdo:

—No está mal tener en casa una personilla que quiere que uno tenga éxito.

—Ya sé que van a cuidarme —dijo, y se tumbó otra vez sobre la almohada, como si tuviera una gran seguridad.

Él sabía que cuando hablaba en plural, sin dar más explicaciones, se refería a las masas que iban a lanzarse detrás de él, y lo tomó con la misma naturalidad de siempre:

—No creo que vayamos a dejarles mucho a «ellos».

—No, me apuesto a que no vais a dejarles mucho.

Paul soltó una carcajada al oírlo, y dijo:

—Señorita Muniment, la más lista de todos eres tú.

Se le iluminaron los ojos al oír la alabanza y, al mirar los de su hermano, añadió:

—También me da pena de la princesa, ¿sabes?

—Bueno, pues yo no quiero presumir pero a mí no —contestó Paul, pasando por delante del espejo que había encima de la chimenea.

—Sí, tú tendrás éxito y yo también, pero *ella* no.

Se paró un momento, con la mano en la aldabilla de la puerta, y dijo muy serio, con aire casi sentencioso:

—No sólo es guapa, tan guapa como un cuadro, sino extraordinariamente lista, y ha hecho cosas que no había hecho nadie nunca.

—Sí, ya la conozco —contestó su hermana, y luego, cuando salía de la habitación, le gritó—: ¡Pero no me importa nada con tal que llegues a ser primer ministro de Inglaterra!

Tres cuartos de hora más tarde llamaba a la puerta de Madeira Crescent e inmediatamente le hacían pasar al salón, en donde estaba la princesa sola, con el abrigo y el gorro puestos. Estaba sentada y no se movió al verle entrar, sólo levantó la vista hacia él con una sonrisa.

—Es más valiente de lo que yo creía —dijo con su hermosa voz.

—Como me asocie con usted por algún tiempo aprenderé a ser valiente. Pero nunca dejaré de ser tímido.

De pie, en medio del pequeño salón, daba la impresión de ser muy alto. Miró en torno, para buscar un sitio donde sentarse, pero ella no hizo nada por ayudarle; le miraba en silencio desde su asiento con las

manos cruzadas sobre la falda. Por fin, cuando sin ninguna protesta por parte de ella el joven había elegido la silla más incómoda del salón, contestó:

—Eso no es más que llamar de otra forma al valor de la desesperación. Me había puesto las cosas por si acaso, pero no esperaba que viniese.

—Bien, pues aquí estoy… y ésa es la gran cosa —dijo él con buen humor.

—Sí, no hay duda de que es una gran cosa. Pero va a ser todavía mayor cuando esté allí.

—Me temo que espera demasiado —observó el joven—. ¿Dónde está? Creo que no me lo dijo.

La princesa sacó del bolsillo una carta cerrada y se la entregó sin decir nada. Él se levantó para cogerla, la abrió, y se puso a leerla delante de ella. Luego fue derecho a la chimenea y tiró el papel al fuego. La princesa, al verlo, se levantó corriendo, como si quisiera rescatar el documento, pero, al ver la cara con que la miraba, se detuvo. La sonrisa que apareció en la suya era un poco forzada.

—¿De qué tiene miedo? —preguntó—. Doy por sentado que se sabe cuál es la casa. Supongo que si vamos tenemos que admitir que vamos.

La cara de Paul revelaba que le había molestado, pero contestó con bastante calma:

—Nada de papeles, nada de papeles.

—Tiene un cuidado terrible —dijo la princesa.

—Sí, con usted tengo mucho cuidado.

Ella volvió a sentarse en el sofá y le pidió que llamara para que sirvieran el té; creía que era mucho mejor que lo tomaran antes de salir. Después de haber sido dada la orden, comentó:

—Veo que la emoción va a ser mucho menos fuerte que cuando hago las cosas yo sola.

—¿Es eso lo que busca, emociones fuertes?

—Por supuesto, señor Muniment. ¿Usted no?

—¡Dios me libre! Deseo tener tan pocas emociones de cualquier clase como sea posible.

—Naturalmente que uno no trata de hacer una exhibición, lo que quiere es hacer algo. Pero sería una pena que de paso no pudiera divertirse un poco.

—Lo que a mí me gusta es estar bien tranquilo.

—Y a mí también. Pero todo depende de cómo se entienda. A mí me gusta la tranquilidad en medio del tumulto.

—Tiene usted unas ideas muy raras sobre los tumultos. No tienen nada de bueno.

La princesa meditó esas palabras un momento:

—Empiezo a pensar si no será demasiado prudente. No me gustaría. ¿Si le acusan de haber estado en donde vamos, lo negaría?

—Con un panorama así, lo más sencillo sería no ir, ¿no le parece?

—¿A qué panorama se refiere, a que nos cojan o al de tener que mentir?

—Me imagino que si se miente bien, no le cogen a uno —contestó Paul, que había recobrado su buen humor.

—No quiere tomarme en serio —dijo la princesa, sin enfadarse, sin resentimiento, con una tristeza inteligente y resignada. Pero había un dejo de reproche en el tono en que añadió—: Creo que no tiene ninguna ganar de ir.

—¿Para qué iba a venir entonces… sobre todo si no la tomo en serio?

—Ése no ha sido nunca motivo para que un hombre no vaya a ver a una mujer —dijo la princesa—. Más bien suele ser al contrario.

Paul se puso a mirar la habitación, contemplando un mueble tras otro; lo hacía siempre cuando estaba enzarzado en alguna discusión, y no significaba tanto que estuviera pensando en lo que decía su interlocutor como que sus pensamientos iban por otro camino. Por fin contestó a su observación:

—Creo que no acabo de entender lo que quiere decir con eso de tomar en serio a una mujer.

—¡Ay, es usted un hombre perfecto! —lamentó ella—. ¿No le parece que los cambios que andamos buscando van a favorecernos también a nosotros?

—No creo que alteren para nada su posición.

—Si no esperase que lo hicieran, no haría nada —dijo la princesa.

—No me cabe duda de que haría muchas cosas.

La princesa permaneció callada unos momentos, y él tampoco tenía ganas de decir nada.

—Me gustaría saber si es en su conciencia donde encuentra motivos para trabajar conmigo —dijo ella por fin.

—No es en la conciencia donde los busco —rió Paul.

La doncella trajo el té y, mientras su dueña hacía sitio para colocar las cosas en una mesita que había

junto a ella, contestó:

—Bueno, no me importa, porque creo que le tengo en mi poder.

—Tiene usted a todo el mundo en su poder —declaró Paul.

—Sí, pero todo el mundo no es nadie —respondió ella con cierta sequedad y, pasado un momento, le dijo—: A esa extraordinaria hermanita suya, seguro que sí la toma en serio, ¿no?

—La quiero mucho, si es eso lo que quiere decir. Pero no creo que su posición vaya a cambiar.

—¿Se refiere a su posición en la cama? Si le parece que no va a recobrar nunca la salud, siento mucho oírlo.

—Su salud puede pasar. A lo que me refiero es a que, como casi todas las mujeres agradables, seguirá siendo nada más que un ornamento de la vida.

Se había dado cuenta de que el joven pronunciaba mal «agradables», pero aceptaba esa peculiaridad de su visitante con el mismo espíritu de transfiguración con que había aceptado ya otras.

—Para su vida, desde luego. Pero no sé si puede decirse que sea un ornamento para la de ella.

—Su vida y la mía son una misma cosa.

—Es una persona prodigiosa —dijo la princesa, y dio el asunto por terminado.

Pero mientras él bebía el té, comentó que para ser revolucionario era ciertamente prodigioso también; y él quiso saber a su vez si no resultaba muy natural que un revolucionario se portara como lo que era: un revolucionario. Se bebió tres tazas de té, y declaró que era estupendo, mejor incluso que el de *lady* Aurora. Eso le llevó a decir, mientras dejaba la tercera taza, y volvía a mirar la habitación, arrobado, casi con envidia:

—Tiene usted todas las cosas tan bien, que no veo qué interés pueda tener.

—¿Qué interés, qué quiere decir?

—Pues en haber llegado a meterse tanto.

A la princesa se le iluminó la cara de entusiasmo:

—¿Le parece que estoy muy metida?

—Hasta el cuello, señora.

—¿Y cree que *il y va* de mi cuello, vamos, está en peligro? —tradujo en seguida.

—Ya entiendo su francés. Bueno, la vigilaré —dijo Muniment.

—Pues no se olvide de que espero no mentir.

—¿Ni siquiera por mí? —preguntó él, y luego añadió en el mismo tono familiar, que no era áspero ni falto de respeto, sino natural y directo, como debido a una creciente amistad—: Si yo fuera su marido vendría y me la llevaría.

—Haga el favor de no hablar de mi marido —contestó ella muy seria—. No está cualificado para hacerlo. No sabe nada de él.

—Sé lo que me ha dicho Hyacinth.

—¡Uf, Hyacinth! —exclamó ella impaciente.

Hubo un nuevo silencio, al parecer no ajeno a su alusión al encuadernador; pero cuando Muniment volvió a hablar, no fue para referirse otra vez a él:

—Veo que me encuentra demasiado franco y ordinario.

—Desde luego, no tiene el agrado de Hyacinth —la princesa, por su parte, no deseaba eludir el tema—. Pero eso es algo que se les concede a muy pocos, y no creo que sean precisamente las buenas maneras lo que andamos buscando.

—Sí, no resultará muy halagüeño cuando recortemos algunas concesiones —comentó Paul—. Pero yo también quiero agradarle; quiero parecerme lo más posible a Hyacinth.

—Ésa no es la forma de agradarme. No se lo perdono, es muy tonto.

—No diga eso —protestó el joven—; es un muchacho estupendo.

—Sí, es un ser maravilloso y tiene cualidades extraordinarias. Pero es deplorablemente convencional.

—Sí, si habla de tomar las cosas en serio, él las toma muy en serio.

—¿Le ha contado alguna vez su vida? —preguntó la princesa.

—No ha necesitado contármela; he visto buena parte de ella.

—Sí, pero quiero decir antes de que le conociera.

Paul lo pensó un poco:

—¿De su nacimiento y de su pobre madre? Creo que fue Rosy quien me contó todo eso.

—¿Y cómo lo sabía si hace el favor?

—¡Uf, si quiere uno saber cómo se entera Rosy de las cosas! No le gusta nada la gente de esa clase. Ella querría que todos fuéramos de alcurnia.

—Pues entonces están de acuerdo, porque lo mismo le pasa al pobre Hyacinth. —La princesa hizo una pausa. Parecía que le costara hablar—: Quiero preguntarle una cosa. ¿Ha recibido la visita de mister Vetch?

—¿Ese señor viejo que toca el violín? No, nunca me ha hecho ese honor.

—Pues ha sido porque yo se lo impedí. Dije que me lo dejara a mí.

—¿Que le dejara qué? —preguntó Paul con cierto asombro.

—Sufre mucho por Hyacinth, por el peligro que corre. Ya sabe a lo que me refiero.

—Sí, ya sé a lo que se refiere —contestó Muniment con mucha calma—. Pero ¿dónde se ha enterado? Yo me imaginaba que era un gran secreto.

—Y lo es. Él no sabe nada; sospecha únicamente.

—¿Y entonces cómo lo sabe usted?

Tuvo otro momento de duda:

—Hago igual que Rosy; lo adivino. Supongo que ya sabe que mister Vetch ha estado cerca de Hyacinth toda la vida; siente por él un gran interés y un gran afecto. Cree que tiene algo pendiente y desea suprimir esas amenazas. —Hizo otra pausa, pero al ver que el joven no decía nada, continuó—: Iba a ir a verle para pedirle que hiciera algo, que lo impidiera; daba la impresión de suponer que su poder en ese asunto era muy grande. Pero, como le digo, le rogué —como un especial favor hacia mí— que le dejara en paz.

—¿Y por qué era un favor para usted? —preguntó Muniment.

—Me proporcionaría la satisfacción de saber que no le molestaban.

Pareció bastante pasmado al oír una explicación tan singular y tan poco adecuada, teniendo en cuenta lo que estaba en juego; así que confesó con cierta guasa:

—Pues fue una consideración por su parte que pasa todos los límites.

—No lo hice por consideración hacia usted; era cuestión de cálculo.

Después de hacer esa declaración, la princesa se acercó a la chimenea y se puso a arreglarse las cintas del gorro delante del espejo que la adornaba. Paul la miraba con mucha curiosidad; a pesar de su calma imperturbable y del escepticismo que siempre había sentido hacia ella, no estaba asegurado frente a la facultad que tenía de intrigar y poner en tensión a todos los que tenían algo que ver con ella. Seguía sus movimientos, pero estaba claro que no podía seguir sus maquinaciones; por eso, lo único que pudo hacer fue escuchar cuando dijo de repente:

—¿Sabe por qué le dije que viniera a verme? ¿Sabe por qué fui a ver a su hermana? No era más que un plan.

—Nosotros esperábamos que fuera un simple impulso humanitario y social.

—Era humanitario, e incluso social, pero no era simple. Quería salvar a Hyacinth.

—¿Salvarle?

—Quería hablar con usted como estoy hablando ahora.

—¡Fue una idea muy bonita! —exclamó Paul con toda franqueza.

—Siento una estimación por él mucho mayor de lo que pueda decirse. Algunas de sus opiniones me sacan de quicio, y por eso hace un momento me permití decir que era tonto. Pero después de todo, no es por las opiniones que tengan por lo que queremos a nuestros amigos, así que no veo tampoco por qué van a ser motivo para que no los queramos. Robinson es una persona sumamente generosa, y tiene una inteligencia muy aguda, aunque algunas cosas las embrolla completamente. Usted acaba de expresar el interés que siente por él; por lo tanto, deberíamos estar de acuerdo. Quiero decir, de acuerdo en sacarle del lío en que se ha metido.

Muniment pareció pensarlo un poco antes de asentir a todas esas proposiciones; su mente tenía una limitación, que era la de no responder sin haber entendido bien antes. Pasado un momento, y refiriéndose a la última observación de la princesa en la que parecían culminar todas las demás, contestó moviendo la cabeza y subiendo mucho las cejas:

—Su lío no es nada importante.

—Pues usted pensaba que sí que lo era cuando le metió en él.

—Pensé que le gustaría.

—Ésa no es razón para dejar a la gente que haga lo que no es bueno para ellos.

—No pensaba tanto en lo que pudiera ser bueno para él como en lo que pudiera ser malo para otros. Puede hacer lo que le apetezca.

—Eso es muy fácil de decir. Hay que convencerlos de que no le llamen.

—Convénzalos usted, señora.

—¿Cómo puedo convencerlos? —gritó ella—. Si pudiera hacerlo no me habría acercado a usted. Yo no tengo ninguna influencia y, aunque la tuviera, mis motivos iban a levantar sospechas. Es usted el que tiene

que hacerlo.

—¿Voy a decirles que se muere de miedo?

—¡No es verdad, no es verdad!

—¿Qué excusa puedo darles entonces?

—Dígales que ha cambiado de opinión.

—¿Y no sería eso igual que acusarle de traidor, y encima hacerlo de una forma hipócrita?

—Dígales que es sencillamente mi deseo.

—Eso no favorecería mucho a usted.

—¿Va a ponerme en peligro? Eso es precisamente lo que quiero.

—Sí, pero por lo que yo entiendo usted quiere sufrir *por* el pueblo, no a causa de ellos. Quiere mucho a Robinson; no podía ser de otra manera; pero debería recordar que en la línea que hemos elegido nuestros afectos, nuestros lazos naturales, nuestras timideces y nuestros encogimientos… —Su voz se había hecho más grave, y dejó de hablar un momento, mientras los hermosos ojos de la princesa, clavados en su cara, mostraban lo afectada que estaba ante esa declaración tan solemne. Estaba hablando como si la tomara en serio—: todas esas cosas no son nada, no deben pesar más que una pluma comparadas con el servicio que tenemos que prestar.

Ella empezó a ponerse los guantes:

—Es usted un hombre extraordinario.

—Eso me dice Rosy.

—¿Por qué no lo hace usted?

—¿Hacer el trabajo de Hyacinth? Pues porque es mejor hacer el mío.

—¿Y podría decirme cuál *es* el suyo?

—No lo sé —dijo Paul Muniment, con toda sinceridad—. Espero que me den instrucciones.

—¿Ha hecho algún juramento como Hyacinth?

—Mire, señora, *yo*, cuando hago un juramento, no lo digo.

—¡Oh, *usted*…! —exclamó ella con un tonillo marcado y ambiguo.

Parecía abandonar con ello el asunto, pero sugerir al mismo tiempo que le encontraba muy anormal. Esa suposición se hizo patente al decir:

—¿Y puede quedarse tan tranquilo al ver cómo se le llevan a un amigo a quien quiere?

Al oír esas palabras, Paul, por vez primera, se mostró impaciente:

—Más valdría que me dejara a mí a mi querido amigo.

La princesa, sin apartar los ojos de él, dio un pequeño suspiro:

—¿Qué, nos vamos?

Paul cogió su sombrero, pero no hizo movimiento alguno hacia la puerta:

—Si me hizo el honor de conocerme y de pedirme que viniera a verla sólo para decir lo que acaba de decir de Hyacinth, es posible que no merezca la pena que vayamos al sitio que ha dicho. ¿No era sólo un pretexto?

—¡Me parece que tiene miedo! —dijo ella con toda franqueza, pero, a pesar de la exclamación, los dos salieron de la casa.

Salieron juntos, después de haber estado un momento mirando arriba y abajo, al parecer, para buscar un coche. Tanto como la oscuridad, que era ya completa, permitía ver el panorama, no había vehículo alguno al que llamar. Volvieron hacia la izquierda y, después de un paseo de varios minutos por pequeñas bocacalles, desembocaron en otra más populosa en la que había tiendas iluminadas, ómnibus y la posibilidad evidente de dar con un coche. Volvieron a pararse, y en seguida pasó un coche vacío al que llamaron y paró junto a ellos. Entretanto, una figura cautelosa había estado siguiéndolos, una persona que ya en Madeira Crescent, cuando salieron de la casa, estaba parada al otro lado de la calle, a una considerable distancia. Al salir ellos se había retirado un poco, pero sin perderlos de vista. Cuando echaron a andar caminó también en la misma dirección, vigilándolos pero manteniendo la distancia. Se había acercado más, al parecer por no poder contener su impaciencia, cuando llegaron a Westbourne Grove, y durante el minuto que permanecieron allí había estado expuesto a ser reconocido por la princesa, sólo con que hubiera vuelto la cabeza. De habérsele ocurrido obedecer a ese impulso habría descubierto que su aristocrático marido iba siguiéndole la pista. Pero ella tenía otras cosas en que pensar, y no pudo ver que en un momento dado se había acercado como para dar la impresión de que iba a lanzarse sobre ella por detrás. No es necesario decir que lo que se proponía era averiguar qué clase de hombre era el que la acompañaba. El tiempo de que dispuso para hacerlo fue breve, porque pronto se dio cuenta, con mayor rapidez de la que solía mostrar, de que estaban buscando un vehículo, cosa que iba ponerlos fuera de su alcance, y que le hizo

a él también dedicar su atención a llamar a un segundo coche que pudiera pasar por allí. Hay partes de Londres en las que es imposible ver un solo coche, pero no hay ninguna en la que no pueda verse más que uno solo; gracias a lo cual, el príncipe Casamassima pudo levantar su bastón para hacer una seña en el mismo momento en que las dos personas objeto de su persecución arrancaban metiendo mucho ruido. Detrás de ellos, y en medio de la oscuridad, no tenía miedo de ser visto. Un instante después había subido a otro coche de alquiler, cuyo cochero acompañó la exclamación habitual de «¡Muy bien, señor!» con un gruñido breve y jocoso, que al príncipe le pareció esencialmente británico, después de que él le hubiera silbado por encima de la capota y le dijera de forma muy expresiva, pero sin relación alguna con esa nacionalidad: «¡Siga, siga, siga!».

XL

Media hora después de que su amiga saliera de casa con Paul Muniment, *madame* Grandoni bajó a cenar, una comida que hacía en triste soledad, en el saloncito de atrás. Había retirado el plato y estaba sentada sin moverse, con los ojos fijos en el arrugado mantel y las manos en el borde de la mesa, cuando se hizo cargo de que habían pasado a un señor al salón y que permanecía delante de la chimenea discretamente callado. En el mismo momento, la doncella se acercó a la señora y dijo con voz entrecortada:

—¡El príncipe, el príncipe, señora! Es por usted por quien pregunta, señora.

Madame Grandoni le llamó desde donde estaba, se dirigió a él como a su pobre, querido y distinguido amigo, y le dijo que se acercara y le diera el brazo. Él obedeció con solemne prontitud, y la condujo al salón de delante, junto a la chimenea. La ayudó a acomodarse en su asiento y la envolvió en el chal; luego se sentó cerca de ella, y se quedó mirándola con los ojos tristes.

—Dime algo de Roma. La hierba de Villa Borghese debe de estar cuajada de flores.

—Te habría traído algunas de haberlo pensado —dijo él. Luego contempló un poco la habitación—: Comprendo que las pidas en un agujero tan negro como éste. Mi mujer no debería vivir aquí —añadió.

—¡Ay!, querido amigo, para lo que es tu mujer… —suspiró la pobre señora.

El príncipe se levantó, muy nervioso, y ella comprendió que la estirada educación con que había entrado en el cuarto y la había saludado no era más que un esfuerzo por conservar sus buenas maneras. Estaba temblando de indignación:

—¡Es verdad, es verdad! Tiene amantes, tiene amantes. Lo he visto con mis propios ojos y he venido aquí para enterarme.

—No sé lo que has visto, pero el venir aquí para enterarte no te habrá servido de mucho. Además, si los has visto, ya lo sabes. Yo, en todo caso, he dejado de decirte nada.

—¡Tienes miedo, tienes miedo! —gritó el príncipe, con gestos de acusación.

Madame Grandoni le contempló pensativa:

—Siéntate y quédate tranquilo, muy tranquilo. Ya he dejado de prestar atención… no me doy por enterada.

—Bueno, pues yo sí —dijo el príncipe un poco más calmado—. ¿No sabes que ha ido a una casa de un barrio horrible con un hombre?

—Lo considero muy probable, querido príncipe.

—¿Y quién es él? Eso es lo que quiero averiguar.

—¿Cómo voy a poder decírtelo? Yo no le he visto.

La miró con ojos de angustia:

—¿Te parece que eso es ser buena conmigo cuando he venido porque contaba con tu ayuda?

—Ya no soy buena con nadie; no es cuestión de eso. Estoy furiosa, casi tan furiosa como tú.

—¿Y por qué no la vigilas entonces?

—Si no es con ella con quien estoy furiosa. Es conmigo misma —dijo *madame* Grandoni, perdida entre sus pensamientos.

—¿Por haberte vuelto tan indiferente? ¿Es eso lo que quieres decir?

—No, al contrario, por seguir en la casa.

—Gracias a Dios estás todavía aquí; si no, no podría haber venido. ¡Pero vaya casa para la princesa! Podría vivir siquiera como le corresponde.

—La última vez que estuviste en Londres te pareció que era demasiado cara.

Miró otra vez alrededor:

—Todo lo que hace está mal. ¿Es por eso por lo que tienes que marcharte?

—Es estúpido… estúpido… estúpido —dijo su amigo, despacio y muy afectada.

—¿Estúpido?, *che, che*. Estuvo en la casa casi una hora el tipo ese.

—¿En la casa? ¿En qué casa?

—Aquí, donde estás tú. Le vi entrar y, cuando salió, después de mucho rato, ella iba con él.

—¿Y dónde estabas tú mientras tanto?

El príncipe vaciló:

—Estaba al otro lado de la calle. Cuando salieron los seguí. Fue hace más de una hora.

—¿Para qué has venido a Londres?

—¿Que para qué he venido? ¡Pues para meterme en el infierno!

—Más te valía volver a Roma —dijo *madame* Grandoni.

—Sí, claro que volveré, pero sólo cuando me hayas dicho quién es el tipo ese. ¿Cómo es posible que no lo sepas, amiga mía, cuando entra y sale con toda libertad? Y entretanto yo tengo que estar en la puerta esperando poder pescar un momento propicio. No era el mismo, el otro.

—¿El otro?

—¡No, si deben de ser cincuenta! Quiero decir aquel bajito que encontré en la casa un domingo por la tarde.

—Me paso casi todo el tiempo en mi cuarto. Sólo bajo a comer —dijo *madame* Grandoni.

—Pues, querida amiga, sería mucho mejor que te quedaras aquí.

—¿Mejor para quién?

—Si no te retiraras, podrías al menos contestar a mis preguntas.

—Sí, pero es que no tengo la menor gana de contestarlas. Recuerda que no estoy aquí como espía tuya.

—No —dijo el príncipe en tono de profunda tristeza—. Si me hubieras dado algo más de información no habría necesitado venir yo mismo. He llegado a Londres esta misma mañana, y por la tarde me he pasado dos horas yendo y viniendo por ahí enfrente, como si fuera un criado que espera a que el amo vuelva de dar un paseo a caballo. Y no es un caballero… ni siquiera uno de esos tan raros que hay en este país.

—Creo que es escocés o galés —explicó *madame* Grandoni.

—¿Entonces le has visto?

—No, pero le he oído. Habla sin vacilaciones (los suelos de esta casa no son como los que hacemos en Italia), y tiene la misma voz que he notado que tienen los de esas regiones sin civilizar adonde van «de caza». Además, ella me ha dicho algunas cosas. Es un mancebo de farmacia.

—¿Un mancebo de farmacia? *Santo Dio!* Y el otro, el de hace un año (más de un año), era un encuadernador.

—¡Huy, el encuadernador! —suspiró *madame* Grandoni.

—¿Y no se trata con gente de bien? ¿No tiene otros amigos?

—Ya no puedo decirte más, tienes que esperar a que sea libre.

—¿Qué quieres decir?

—Tengo que elegir. O tengo que marcharme, y entonces podré decirte lo que he visto, o, si me quedo, tengo que callarme la boca.

—Pero si te vas, no habrás visto nada —objetó el príncipe.

—Tal como va la cosa, es mucho más de lo que esperaba ver en mi vida.

El príncipe juntó las manos como en una última súplica, pero sonrió al mismo tiempo para conmoverla:

—Queridísima amiga mía, me estás atormentando de curiosidad. Si me dices una cosa, no vuelvo a preguntarte nada más. ¿Adonde iban? Por amor de Dios, ¿qué casa es esa?

—Yo no sé nada de sus casas —dijo *madame* Grandoni con un gesto de impaciencia.

—¿Entonces son varias? ¿Cuántas son?

Ella no contestó, seguía con la mirada fija y la barbilla metida en la pañoleta. El príncipe continuó apremiándole con sus penas y con su hermosa claridad italiana, como si sus labios cortaran y moldearan los sonidos, mientras sus largos dedos se agitaban en ademanes rápidos y expresivos:

—La calle es estrecha y oscura, pero es como todas esas calles horribles. No tiene importancia; está al final de un jaleo de calles tremendo. Fueron veinte minutos en el coche, luego pararon y se bajaron. Anduvieron juntos a pie unos minutos más. Había muchas bocacalles y parecían conocerlas bien. A mí me resultó muy difícil, porque claro que también había bajado del coche; tenía que estar un poco alejado y pegado a las casas. Chiffinch Street, N. E., así se llamaba —continuó el príncipe, que pronunciaba el nombre con dificultad—, y la casa tiene el número 32. Lo miré después de haber entrado ellos. Es una casa muy mala, peor que ésta, y allí no hay rastro de farmacia y la calle no tiene tiendas. Llamaron al timbre una sola vez, aunque tuvieron que esperar mucho tiempo; a mí, al menos, me pareció que no volvían a tocarlo. Pasaron varios minutos antes de que se abriera la puerta, y yo lo pasé muy mal, porque mientras esperaban

andaban mirando para un lado y otro. ¡Afortunadamente, ya sabes lo que es el aire en ese lugar! No vi luz en la casa, ni siquiera cuando entraron ellos. No puedo decir quién fue el que abrió. Esperé casi media hora para ver cuánto tiempo estaban allí y qué era lo que hacían al salir; por fin mi impaciencia me trajo aquí, porque al saber que ella no estaba tenía la esperanza de verte. Mientras estaba allí entraron otras dos personas: dos hombres que iban juntos, los dos fumando y con aire de *artistia* (apenas pude verlos), pero no salió nadie de la casa. Vi que entraban con los cigarros (y ya puedes imaginarte qué tabaco) donde estaba la princesa. En tiempos —continuó, queriendo gastar una broma— no toleraba que fumara nadie, al menos que fumara yo. La calle es muy tranquila, no pasa casi nadie. Pero ¿qué casa será ésa? ¿Es dónde vive ese hombre? —preguntó casi jadeando.

Se había sentido más animado al ver que ella, a pesar de sus protestas, le escuchaba —veía que estaba escuchándole—, y se sintió aún más animado cuando vio que contestaba con otra pregunta:

—¿Tuviste que cruzar el río para ir allí? Sé que está al otro lado del río.

—No, no estaba por esa parte. Intenté preguntarle al cochero que me trajo a casa cómo se llamaba, pero no logré que me entendiera. Son muy torpes —declaró el príncipe. Luego se acercó un poco más a ella—: Pero ¿qué estaban haciendo allí? ¿Por qué fue con él?

—Creen que están conspirando. *Ecco!* —dijo *madame* Grandoni.

—¿Quieres decir que se han unido a una sociedad secreta, a una banda de revolucionarios y asesinos? *Capisco bene*, no es nada nuevo para mí. Pero a lo mejor sólo simulan que es para eso.

—¿Que sólo simulan? ¿Y para qué iban a simularlo? Ése no es el estilo de Christina.

—Hay otras posibilidades —comentó él.

—Sí, claro, cuando tu mujer se marcha por la noche con unos tipos raros es que se va a *des maisons louches*; puedes pensar lo que quieras, y yo no tengo nada que decir. Tengo mis propias ideas, pero son asunto mío, y no me propongo defender a Christina porque no hay quien la defienda. Cuando hace esas tonterías provoca a uno y le invita a pensar lo peor; pero vamos a dejarlo, a no ser por esta observación con la que me doy ya por satisfecha: si fuera realmente una fresca, capaz de *todo*, no haría lo que hace, no se expondría a que lo pensaran, tendría más cuidado de guardar las apariencias. Yo te digo sencillamente lo que creo. Si creyera que lo que está haciendo no te concernía más que a ti, no comentaría nada, al menos mientras esté aquí sentada. Pero es que concierne a otros, concierne a todo el mundo; por eso no puedo callar por más tiempo. Ha ido a esa casa para hacer que la sociedad salte por los aires.

—Sí, para hacerla saltar, como quería hacerlo antes.

—¡No, mucho más que antes! Ahora está muy metida. Tiene relaciones con gente que está vigilada por la policía. No me lo ha dicho, pero he acabado por convencerme sólo de vivir con ella.

El pobre príncipe se quedó pasmado:

—¿Y ella está vigilada por la policía?

—No puedo decirte; es muy posible… lo único que la policía de aquí es muy distinta de la de otros países.

—Sí, es más tonta. —Miró a la que era su pequeño consuelo con la cara roja de vergüenza—. ¿Y nos va a llevar a semejante escándalo? Eso sería lo peor de todo.

—Hay una posibilidad… la posibilidad de que se canse —comentó *madame* Grandoni—. Sólo que a lo mejor el escándalo puede llegar antes.

—Querida amiga, es el demonio en persona —dijo el príncipe en tono lastimero.

—No, no es el demonio porque lo que desea es hacer el bien.

—¿Y qué bien es el que ha deseado hacerme a mí nunca? —preguntó él con los ojos brillantes.

Movió la cabeza con una tristeza comparable a la del príncipe:

—Es imposible que os hagáis ninguna clase de bien el uno al otro. Lo que tenéis que hacer los dos es quedaros tranquilos, cada uno por su lado.

—¿Cómo voy a quedarme yo tranquilo oyendo tales infamias? —Se levantó violentamente, y de una forma que hizo que su compañera soltara una risita incongruente en cuanto le oyó pronunciar las palabras —: ¡No va a volar la sociedad!

—No, se aburrirá de muerte antes de que esté maduro el *coup*. Consuélate con eso.

—Eso esperaba encontrarme; que ya se le había pasado el capricho. Ha pasado ya por muchas locuras.

—Dale tiempo, dale tiempo —replicó *madame* Grandoni.

—¿Tiempo de arrastrar mi nombre ante un tribunal? Toda esa gente son ladrones, criminales, incendiarios.

—No puedes decirme nada que no le haya dicho yo a ella.

—¿Y qué dice para defenderse?

—¿Defenderse? ¿Has oído alguna vez a Christina defenderse? —preguntó la pobre señora—. Lo único que me dice es: «no tengas miedo; te prometo por todo lo más sagrado que tú personalmente no vas a padecer nada». Habla como si lo tuviera todo en sus manos. Y no hay duda de que yo soy una cerda vieja y egoísta, pero también tiene una un corazón para los demás.

—Y yo también lo tengo, creo que puedo aspirar a eso —dijo el príncipe—. Me dices que le dé tiempo y ya sé que ella se lo va a tomar, se lo dé o no. Pero lo que sí puedo hacer es dejar de darle dinero. Por Dios que es ése mi deber como hombre decente.

—Ella me dice que no le das mucho.

—¿Mucho? Depende de lo que llames mucho. Es suficiente para que todos esos canallas anden alrededor de ella.

—No todos ellos son canallas, no, lo mismo que no lo es ella. ¡Eso es lo malo del asunto! —suspiró cansada *madame* Grandoni.

—Pues el fulano de esta noche, el farmacéutico, ¿qué me dices de él?

—Me ha hablado de él como de un buen chico.

—Sí, pero cree que también está muy bien volarnos a todos. ¿No acepta su dinero?

—Yo no sé lo que acepta. Pero hay algunas cosas… ¡que no permita Dios que nos olvidemos de ellas! La miseria de Londres es algo espantoso.

—*Che vuole?* Hay miseria en todas partes —opinó el príncipe—. Ésa es la voluntad de Dios. *Ci vuol'pazienza!* ¿Y en este país nadie da limosnas?

—Yo creo que todo el mundo. Mas parece que no bastante.

El príncipe no dijo nada de momento; aquella afirmación de *madame* Grandoni parecía ofrecer ciertas dificultades. Pero la solución se presentó en seguida, y lo hizo en forma de la siguiente pregunta:

—¿Qué esperas de un país que no tiene verdadera fe?

—La verdadera fe es una gran cosa, pero también hay sufrimiento en los países que la tienen.

—*Evidentemente*. Pero ayuda a soportar el sufrimiento, y lo compensa más tarde; mientras que aquí… —dijo el príncipe con una sonrisa triste y poco convincente—: Si se me permite hablar por mí mismo, es siempre una ayuda en cualquier circunstancia.

—Está muy bien —contestó *madame* Grandoni, sin mucha amabilidad.

Estaba de pie delante de ella, con los ojos fijos por un momento en el suelo:

—¿Y el famoso Sholto (Godfrey Gerald) ya no viene por aquí?

—Hace meses que no le he visto. No sé nada de él.

—No le gustan los farmacéuticos ni los encuadernadores, ¿eh?

—Si fue él quien los trajo por primera vez… para agradar a tu mujer.

—Pues si le han echado, me parece muy bien. La cosa sería encontrar a alguien que los echase a ellos.

—*Aspetta, aspetta!* —dijo *madame* Grandoni.

—Ése es un consejo muy bueno, pero no resulta divertido seguirlo —comentó el príncipe. Luego añadió —: Hace un momento hablaste, como refiriéndote a algo especial, de aquel *giovane*, el obrerillo que me encontré en la otra casa. ¿Está todavía en candelero o ha tenido ya que pagar sus crímenes?

—Pues ha tenido que pagar, pero la verdad es que no sé por qué. No tengo nada malo que decirte de él, como no sea que me temo que su estrella se está apagando.

—*Poverino!* —exclamó el príncipe.

—Eso fue precisamente lo que yo le dije la primera vez que le vi. No sabía cómo ocurriría, pero tenía el presentimiento de que iba a ocurrir. Y ha ocurrido porque ha cambiado de opinión. Ahora tiene las mismas ideas que tú —*ci vuol'pazienza*.

El príncipe escuchaba con la misma expresión de ansiedad herida, la misma boca abierta y los mismos ojos angustiados, todo lo que salía de labios de *madame* Grandoni:

—Eso por lo menos es más honrado. ¿Entonces *él* no va a Chiffinch Street?

—Yo no sé nada de Chiffinch Street, pero tengo la impresión de que no va a ningún sitio donde vayan juntos Christina y el otro, el escocés. Pero esos son asuntos muy delicados —concluyó *madame* Grandoni.

Esas palabras parecieron impresionar mucho a su interlocutor:

—¿Quieres decir que el escocés es… cómo le llamaría yo, su sucesor?

Tardó un poco en contestar:

—Yo me imagino que éste es un caso diferente. Pero no acabo de entenderlo; fue el otro, el pequeño, el que le ayudó a conocer al escocés.

—Y ahora se han peleado… por mi mujer. ¡Todo ello resulta edificante! —gimió el príncipe.

—No puedo decírtelo ni lo habría intentado tampoco, pero es que Assunta me lo cuenta.

—Me gustaría que me hablara a mí.

—¡Amigo mío, cómo encontrar a Christina acudiendo a las criadas…!

—No podría ser mucho peor que ahora. Pero en fin, no sé por qué hablo como si me importara, porque ya no me importa. La he dado por imposible. Se ha terminado.

—Me alegro de saberlo —dijo *madame* Grandoni muy seria.

—Tú misma hiciste la distinción perfectamente. Mientras sólo trataba de herirme a mí, yo, en la medida de mis fuerzas, podía perdonar, podía esperar. Podía tener esperanzas. Pero puesto que se ha lanzado con todo descaro a esos manejos criminales, y alza la mano, según me dices, con un propósito determinado, y en contra de las instituciones más sagradas, ya es demasiado. ¡Sí, es demasiado! Puede hacer lo que quiera; ya no es mi mujer. Ni un solo penique mío volverá a entrar en su bolsillo ni en los de esos canallas que se aprovechan de ella y la han corrompido.

—Querido príncipe, me parece que tienes razón. Y, sin embargo, lo siento —suspiró la pobre señora, que alargó la mano para que la ayudara a levantarse de la silla—. Si se vuelve pobre de verdad me será mucho más difícil dejarla. *Esto* no es pobreza, ni siquiera una buena imitación, como a ella le gustaría que fuese. Pero ¿qué iban a decir de mí si, después de haberla seguido entre tantos esplendores, doy media vuelta en el momento en que empieza a estar necesitada?

—¿Me lo preguntas para que me vuelva atrás? —balbució el príncipe, molesto.

—Ni por asomo; sea lo que sea lo que se diga o lo que tú puedas hacer, la única salida digna que me queda es hacer el baúl. Puedes juzgar tú mismo por lo que has oído.

—Si sigues aquí tendrá todo lo que necesite. —Hablaba en voz baja y de una forma que delataba la vergüenza que sentía por aquel intento de soborno.

Madame Grandoni le contempló con asombro y se apartó de él:

—¿Qué significa eso? Creí que no te importaba.

Ignoro qué explicación hubiera podido darle el príncipe de no haberse abierto la puerta en ese momento para dar paso a Hyacinth Robinson. Se quedó parado al ver un extraño en el escenario; pero, antes de que tuviera tiempo de decir nada, *madame* Grandoni le cortó con poca ceremonia:

—No vienes en buen momento; la princesa no está en casa.

—Ya me lo han dicho, pero me atreví a entrar para saludarla a usted, como he hecho otras veces —contestó el chico. Luego añadió en un intento de arreglar las cosas—: Le pido mil perdones. No me dijeron que no estaba sola.

—El señor ya se va, pero yo me voy también —dijo *madame* Grandoni—. Tengo que irme a mi habitación; estoy que me caigo a pedazos. Haz el favor de perdonarme.

Hyacinth tuvo tiempo de reconocer al príncipe, y el caballero le hizo el mismo favor, como se demostró al preguntarle a la señora en italiano:

—¿No es el encuadernador?

—*Sicuro* —dijo ella, mientras Hyacinth decía que lamentaba encontrarla indispuesta y se iba hacia la puerta.

—¡Un momento, un momento, por favor! —se interpuso el príncipe, que levantó la mano persuasivo y dedicó a Hyacinth una sonrisa inesperada y excesiva—: Ten la bondad de presentarme al caballero —dijo en inglés a *madame* Grandoni.

Ella no dio muestras de sorpresa ante el ruego —tenía ya agotadas todas sus reservas—, pero pronunció el nombre de príncipe Casamassima, y le hizo a Hyacinth el favor de decir:

—Ya sabe quién eres.

—¿Me permitirá entretenerle un momentito? —le rogó el príncipe a su compañero de visita; y dijo luego a *madame* Grandoni—: Hablaré un poco con él. Quizá no sea necesario que te molestemos si no deseas quedarte.

Por un momento, por la forma de mover la cabeza y de reírse, pareció recobrar su antiguo buen humor:

—¡Recuerda que si hablas mucho, puede volver! Sí, sí, yo me voy arriba. *Felicissima notte, signor!* —y se dirigió hacia la puerta, que Hyacinth, no poco desconcertado, mantenía abierta para que pasara.

Las razones que impulsaban al príncipe Casamassima a querer hablar con él eran misteriosas, pero estaba ya a punto de cerrar la puerta, después de salir la señora, como muestra de ponerse a disposición del gran personaje, que en ese momento levantó la mano para impedírselo con mucha cortesía:

—Puesto que mi visita ha terminado y la suya parece que queda en nada, podríamos marcharnos, ¿no?

—Naturalmente que iré con usted.

Hablaba con cierta sequedad instintiva a pesar de la extraña afabilidad del príncipe y a pesar también de sentir pena por el aristócrata a quien la última exclamación de *madame* Grandoni, de haber sido

pronunciada en inglés, podía haber producido un sonrojo muy penoso. No nos está permitido meternos a averiguar lo que Hyacinth podía sentir sobre su conciencia al encontrarse cara a cara con un marido agraviado, pero dio por supuesto, con bastante naturalidad, que las cosas podían ponerse muy serias, aunque de momento la actitud del príncipe era absurdamente amable.

—¿Va usted por aquí, va usted para allá? —preguntó el príncipe cuando los dos estaban delante de la casa—. Si me lo permite tomaré la misma dirección.

Al contestar Hyacinth que le era indiferente ir hacia un lado u otro, el príncipe volvió a la derecha y dijo:

—Bueno, pues vamos por aquí, pero *adagio*, si no le importa, y sólo un pequeño trecho.

Su inglés estaba lejos de ser perfecto, pero los errores que cometía resultaban una especie de flores artificiales; Hyacinth notaba el esfuerzo que hacía para expresarse con claridad, de forma que su condición de extranjero no fuera una desventaja a la hora de hablar con un británico modesto e ignorante. Con su rapidez para darse cuenta de las cosas, el chico comprendió que se necesitaba muy buena crianza para mantener esa frialdad y aplaudió para sus adentros el éxito de tan difícil hazaña. La consideraba difícil, porque le parecía que lo que llevaba al príncipe a hablar con él necesitaba muchísimas explicaciones, y era señal de muy buena educación expresarse bien en una lengua extranjera en un momento en el que estaba especialmente nervioso, y con una persona de una posición social tan distinta a la suya.

Hyacinth sabía lo que opinaba el príncipe sobre la importancia que él pudiera tener; no se forjaba ilusiones sobre el tipo de gente que recibía su mujer, pero al oírle poner con tanto cuidado una palabra detrás de la otra, se reía para sus adentros de tan inútiles precauciones. El joven pensaba que en caso de apuro podía haberse enfrentado a él en su propia lengua, pues durante su estancia en Venecia había aprendido bastantes palabras italianas.

—Estuve hablando de usted con *madame* Grandoni —anunció el príncipe con una calma perfecta—. Me dijo una cosa que me interesó, por eso voy con usted.

Hyacinth no dijo nada, porque le parecía que la mejor manera de estar a disposición de su interlocutor era permanecer callado.

—Me dijo que había cambiado, que no tiene ya las mismas opiniones.

—¿Las mismas opiniones?

—Sí, sobre la forma de arreglar la sociedad. Ya no desea asesinar a los ricos.

—¡Yo no he deseado nunca semejante cosa! —dijo Hyacinth indignado.

—Si ha cambiado, puede confesarlo —contestó su amigo en tono alentador—. A algunas personas les va muy bien ser ricas, pero no sería nada conveniente que todos fueran pobres.

—Sería muy agradable que todos pudieran ser ricos —sugirió Hyacinth, todavía con mayor suavidad.

—Sí, pero no a base de robar y andar a tiros.

—No, no a base de robar y andar a tiros. Yo nunca he deseado eso.

—No cabe duda de que ella estaba confundida. Pero hoy día, ¿cree que debemos tener paciencia? —prosiguió el príncipe, como si diera muchísima importancia al hecho de atribuir a Hyacinth tan valiosa convicción—. Ése es también mi punto de vista.

—Sí, claro, debemos tener paciencia —dijo el joven, que estaba riéndose para sus adentros.

Habían llegado al final del pequeño Crescent, y el príncipe se paró allí, debajo del farol. Con la ayuda de su luz contempló un poco la cara del joven, y luego dijo:

—Si no me equivoco, conoce usted mucho a la princesa.

Hyacinth vaciló:

—Ha sido muy amable conmigo.

—Es mi mujer… quizá lo sepa.

El señor Robinson vaciló otra vez, pero contestó pasado un momento:

—Me ha dicho que estaba casada. —Y nada más haber pronunciado esas palabras pensó que eran una idiotez.

—Supongo que quiere decir que no lo sabría de no habérselo dicho ella. Indudablemente nada parece indicarlo. Puede imaginarse lo agradable que eso es para mí.

—Yo no me imagino nada, no puedo juzgar.

—Tiene razón, es imposible.

El príncipe estaba delante de él, y a la pálida luz del farol de gas el joven podía verle mejor la cara. Tenía una expresión muy rara, un aire de agotamiento y ansiedad; le brillaban los ojos y al pobre Hyacinth le pareció que el desgraciado noble debía de estar malo y con fiebre. Pasado un momento continuó:

—Ya sé que le parece muy raro que esté hablando. Quiero que me diga una cosa.

—Temo que esté usted muy mal —dijo Hyacinth.

—Sí, estoy muy mal; pero estaré mejor si me lo dice. Es porque vuelve usted a tener mejores ideas… por eso es por lo que le pregunto.

La idea de que la situación del marido de la princesa era verdaderamente lastimosa, de que sufría y estaba desamparado, de que era un caballero, y hasta un hombre incapaz de hacer nunca un gran daño, todas esas verdades se le metieron en el corazón y le movieron a sentir deseos de ser amable con él, y de prestarle cualquier servicio razonable que pudiera pedirle. Tenía la impresión de que necesitaría estar muy mal para llegar a pedirle alguno, pero eso ya era asunto suyo:

—Si quiere que le acompañe hasta dejarle en su casa, lo haré —dijo por fin.

Mientras hablaba se daba cuenta de lo absurdo que resultaba que estuviera en los mejores términos con una persona a la que había considerado hasta entonces como el peor enemigo de la más extraordinaria de las mujeres. No podía ni sentir resentimiento contra el príncipe.

El personaje agradeció la cortesía del ofrecimiento con una ligera inclinación de su larga delgadez:

—Le estoy muy agradecido, pero no voy a casa. No voy a casa hasta que sepa esto: a qué casa ha ido ella. ¿Quiere decírmelo?

—¿A qué casa? —repitió Hyacinth.

—Ha ido con una persona que usted conoce. Me lo dijo *madame* Grandoni. Es un farmacéutico escocés.

—¿Un farmacéutico escocés? —preguntó Hyacinth sorprendido.

—Los he visto yo mismo hace una, dos horas. Escuche, escuche, voy a ser muy claro —dijo el príncipe, y puso el dedo índice sobre la otra mano para darle mayor énfasis—. Vino a esa casa, ésa en la que hemos estado nosotros, quiero decir, y estuvo allí mucho tiempo. Yo estaba aquí, en la calle; me he pasado el día en la calle. Salieron juntos, y estuve vigilándolos, los seguí.

Hyacinth había escuchado con asombro y también con inquietud; el príncipe le daba mucha importancia y un gran aire de misterio a todo lo que contaba, pero al oír las últimas palabras dijo:

—Eso no es asunto mío; no puedo oírlo. Yo no vigilo, yo no sigo a nadie.

El príncipe le miró sorprendido, pero luego empezó otra vez a hablar, más de prisa que antes:

—¿No comprende que han ido a una casa en la que conspiran, en la que preparan unas cosas horribles? ¿Cómo puede parecerle bien?

—¿Y cómo lo sabe usted, señor? —preguntó Hyacinth muy serio.

—*Madame* Grandoni fue quien me lo dijo.

—Entonces, ¿por qué me pregunta a mí?

—Porque no estoy seguro, creo que ella no lo sabe. Quiero saber más, para estar seguro de cuál es la verdad. ¿Va a ese sitio sólo por causa de la revolución o va para estar sola con él?

—¿Con él? —La voz del príncipe y la expresión de sus ojos le habían dado de algún modo vida a la sugerencia.

—Con el hombre alto, con el farmacéutico. Subieron juntos a un coche de alquiler; la casa está muy lejos, en esos barrios perdidos.

Hyacinth se rehízo un poco:

—No sé nada de ese asunto ni me importa. Si eso es todo lo que desea preguntarme sería mejor que nos separáramos.

Al príncipe se le alargó la cara y pareció ponerse más pálido:

—Entonces no es verdad que odie esas abominaciones.

Hyacinth acabó de asombrarse del todo:

—¿Qué puede usted saber de mis opiniones? ¿Cómo pueden interesarle?

El príncipe le miró desilusionado; levantó los brazos y volvió a dejarlos caer:

—Esperaba que me ayudase.

—¡Cuando estamos preocupados, no podemos ayudarnos demasiado! —exclamó Hyacinth.

Pero tan sesuda reflexión no fue escuchada por el príncipe, que en el momento en que la pronunciaba se había vuelto para mirar en dirección contraria a la que llevaban, hacia el otro extremo del Crescent, soliviantado por el ruido de un coche que se acercaba. El sitio estaba tranquilo y desierto, y resonaban en él las ruedas del vehículo.

El príncipe lo miraba amenazador a través de la oscuridad y en seguida dijo en voz baja, pero muy excitado:

—Han vuelto… han vuelto. Ya puede verlo… ¡sí, los dos!

El coche había disminuido el paso y se había detenido; no había duda de que la casa ante la que estaba parado era la misma que los dos hombres habían dejado poco antes. Hyacinth notó que su extraño

confidente le agarraba del brazo, y con gran esfuerzo y mucha prisa le arrastraba hacia delante. En ese momento, parte de la excitación de que estaba poseído el desgraciado marido de la princesa pareció pasársele a su propia sangre; una repentina ansiedad se apoderó de él, ansiedad por saber qué relaciones eran las que mantenían las dos personas que habían bajado del coche: por un momento había tenido la revelación exacta del estado en que se encuentran los que aman en medio de un ataque de celos. Si le hubieran dicho media hora antes que era capaz de atisbar así, movido por una pasión como ésa, lo habría tomado por un insulto; pero se dejó conducir por su compañero hasta el punto más cercano que les permitía observar a salvo los movimientos de la pareja que acababa de apearse. Era efectivamente la princesa acompañada por Paul Muniment. Y Hyacinth vio que Paul le pagaba al cochero, que arrancó inmediatamente, de su propio bolsillo. Durante unos minutos estuvo con la princesa delante de la puerta de la casa, minutos en los que el corazón del señor Robinson latía como loco, de una forma innoble.

—¿Qué dice él? ¿Qué es lo que dice ella? —susurró el príncipe. Y un momento después añadió—: ¿Entrará otra vez o se marchará?

Hyacinth notó que se le clavaba la pregunta como si se la hiciera él mismo.

Los dos hablaban de prisa y, como la puerta no acababa de abrirse, era evidente que la princesa tardaba a propósito en llamar para prolongar la conversación en la escalera.

—Pues han sido tres, cuatro horas las que ha estado con él —dijo el príncipe en tono lastimero.

—¡Puede estar con ella cincuenta horas! —dijo Hyacinth con desprecio, mientras se volvía avergonzado de sí mismo.

—¡Ha entrado, *sangue di Dio*! —gritó el príncipe, que volvió a agarrarle del brazo y le obligó a mirar.

Todo lo que el joven pudo ver fue que se cerraba la puerta; Paul y la princesa estaban al otro lado.

—¿*Eso* es también por la revolución? —preguntó el príncipe jadeando.

Pero el señor Robinson no contestó; se quedó un momento mirando la puerta cerrada, se separó del príncipe y echó a andar, dejando que la víctima de una ofensa, que sentía tanto como él, agitara inútilmente un bastón absurdo con podio de oro ante la casa muda en la que sólo parpadeaba un poco la luz del dormitorio de *madame* Grandoni.

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Hyacinth tuvo que esperar mucho tiempo, pero cuando Millicent apareció por fin en la puerta su esplendor le hizo comprender el retraso. Oyó primero un tremendo susurro en la escalera, acompañado por el crujido de todo aquel monumento barato, y Millicent se abrió paso por el estrecho pasadizo en el que había estado esperando un cuarto de hora. Muy colorada, exhalaba un perfume fuerte y barato, y le lanzó inmediatamente el manguito, un chisme gordo y duro, para que se lo sostuviera mientras se encajaba los guantes. Abrió la puerta —era cosa que se daba por sabida que no estaba bien hablar en el pasadizo—, y se detuvieron en los escalones que daban a la calle, bajo el sol amarillento del domingo. Millicent lanzó una exclamación al ver la hermosura del día, aunque no era aficionada a admirarse fácilmente. No había pasado el invierno y había empezado la primavera y, aunque sólo fuera por cambiar, la brumosa atmósfera de Londres se permitía una visibilidad casi perfecta. La ciudad podía refrescar su recuerdo de lo que era el cielo, y el cielo podía asegurarse de la posición geográfica de la ciudad. Claro que la nebulosidad esencial de las perspectivas bajas no había desaparecido, pero había aflojado sus envolturas; flotaba como un velillo de niebla entretejida con matices de sol y débiles transparencias. Había calor e irisaciones, se veían cerradas las tiendas, y estaban tocando las campanas de las iglesias. La señorita Henning comentó que era una vergüenza no tener un sitio donde decir a un caballero que esperara; pero ¿qué podía hacer una cuando se veía tan agobiada para ganarse la vida y tenía una habitación para estar un poquito arreglada que no era mayor que una caja de píldoras? No podía soportar el esperar fuera; ya sabía lo que era, cuando tenía que llevarles cosas a casa a las señoras para que escogieran —con lo que tardaban tenían tiempo de escoger un marido— y era algo que le sacaba de quicio. Era algo cruel. Si pudiera tener lo que quería, ya sabía lo que iba a tener; y hablaba de un soñado saloncito donde el visitante pudiera sentarse y entretenerse con el periódico de la mañana, mirando lo que se veía por la ventana o hasta tomándose un vaso de jerez; de esa forma, allí al lado, pero en privado, ella podría vestirse sin tanta prisa, que siempre le ponía la cara colorada.

—Ni sé cómo me he puesto las cosas encima —comentó al ofrecerle su magnificencia a Hyacinth, que se dio cuenta de que había metido un libro pequeño en el manguito.

Él dijo que como hacía un día tan hermoso había venido a proponerle un paseo como los que daban en otros tiempos. Podían pasar una o dos horas en el parque y dar una vuelta por el Serpentine y hasta chapotear un poco si le apetecía; podían contemplar a los corderitos o dar de comer a los patos si llevaba un trozo de pan en el bolso. Millicent declinó totalmente el privilegio de chapotear; no tenía intención de mojarse los volantes del vestido, y dejaba esa clase de diversiones, sobre todo en domingo, a otras chicas más ordinarias. Pero no le importaba ir a dar una vuelta, aunque él no se lo merecía, después de no haber hecho el menor caso de ella aunque se hubiera muerto en su buhardilla. Ella no era una persona a la que se pudiera coger y dejar cuando a uno le conviniera, no tenía una oficina para criadas sin colocación. Estaba convencida que de no haber sido un día tan espléndido le habría mandado a paseo, pero tenía la suerte de que lo perdonaba todo —ella era así de generosa y no podía evitarlo— en cuanto salía el sol. Pero había una cosa: no podía dejar de celebrar el domingo; tenía costumbre de ir a la iglesia, y le pesaría en la conciencia si dejaba de hacerlo por ir a pasar el rato. Más de una vez le había extrañado a Hyacinth que su antigua compañera de juegos fuera tan respetuosa con esa práctica religiosa: de todos los contrastes que ofrecía su naturaleza, esa inclinación devota era quizá el más singular. Era capaz de aguantar erguida el sermón más largo y aburrido, y salía del recinto sagrado con su linda cara embellecida por haber hecho pública su virtud. Se indignaba por el poco caso que Hyacinth hacía de esas cosas, sobre todo teniendo en cuenta lo exigente que era para otras, y sólo se consolaba al pensar que si no bebía ni robaba ni era camorrista, se dedicaba a tener unas ideas tan malas como cualquiera de las que le costaban a uno diez años de cárcel. No le había dicho aún que esas teorías estaban últimamente mucho menos firmes; una instintiva

bondad le había impedido privarle de ese disgusto, que tantos beneficios traía. No había pensado que se habría sentido aún más ofendida, y en consecuencia habría resultado aún más encantadora, de haber podido condenarle sin tener señales que corroboraran su impiedad.

En esa ocasión le hizo saber que iría con él como deseaba si la acompañaba primero a la iglesia; y fue inútil que él protestara de que iban a perder la mañana, que al salir de la iglesia tendrían encima que ir a comer y que no les quedaría tiempo. Contestó sacudiendo la cabeza que ella comía cuando le venía en gana, y que además los domingos comía frío, que no le importaba nada; un argumento que Hyacinth tuvo que aceptar, gracias a la ignorancia absoluta que tenía de todos sus asuntos domésticos, por el misterio pudoroso y las vagas referencias y explicaciones en que siempre había envuelto sus asuntos privados, a pesar de su gran libertad para quejarse, de estar perpetuamente anunciando cambios, mejoras y proposiciones prometedoras para que fuera a prestar sus servicios en otros sitios. Fue con ella hasta su lugar de adoración preferido, escogido al parecer a través de una larga experiencia y, mientras iban andando, no pudo menos de pensar que era una suerte no estar casado con ella. ¡Dios santo!, lo que le habría mareado y lo que le habría «estrujado» en ese caso. Y lo peor de todo era que él habría obedecido igual que un perrito amaestrado, dado su buen natural y el amor que tenía a la paz.

Millicent, al oírlo, preguntó:

—¿Y quieres decirme a quién iba a obedecer un hombre si no era a su propia mujer?

Se sentó en el banco de la iglesia con un aire majestuoso que no desmentía esa idea; parecía responder con su propia persona de credos, participaciones y sacramentos; se mostraba más que devota, resultaba casi pontifical. Hyacinth no se había sentido nunca bajo una protección tan distinguida; en comparación con ella, la princesa Casamassima era una gitana, una aventurera mal vestida. Él había ido a buscarla, no por disfrutar de su austeridad —había tenido una semana demasiado sombría para dedicarse a eso—, sino por lo que tenía de agradable; sin embargo, al ver que le proporcionaba un espectáculo mucho más serio se daba cuenta de que en realidad lo estaba pasando en grande, que aquello era una especie de manifestación de su extraordinaria vitalidad. Tenía sus fases y caprichos, igual que la propia princesa y, si no eran los mismos que los de la señora de Madeira Crescent, demostraban al menos que era una mujer tan fuera de serie como ella. Nadie que no fuera una persona extraordinaria podía darse esos aires; necesitaba estar muy segura de su flexibilidad para compensarlos. La princesa quería destruir la sociedad y Millicent sostenerla; y mientras Hyacinth escuchaba junto a su amiga de la infancia las plegarias, y sentía el roce de una gran unción, se vio obligado a reconocer la liberalidad de un destino que a veces había parecido envidioso. Se le habían dado las mejores oportunidades para elegir entre la belleza de la naturalidad y la belleza del convencionalismo.

Por suerte, aquel domingo no había sermón —por suerte para su herética impaciencia—, de forma que después de dispersarse los fieles quedaba todavía mucho tiempo para dar un paseo por el parque. Los dos atravesaron la casi ininterrumpida extensión de perfecto césped que va desde el Birdcage Walk hasta Hyde Park Corner, y se dirigieron bordeando el Serpentine hacia Kensington Gardens. Una vez cumplidos sus deberes religiosos —ponía el mismo empeño en no asistir a ellos por la tarde que el que ponía en no dejar de hacerlo por la mañana—, una vez que había elevado su voz en oración y alabanza, Millicent cambiaba totalmente de aire; se movía de otra manera, expresaba sus sentimientos con toda libertad, y no tenía inconveniente en que se notara que llevaba puesto su mejor vestido y que podía pasarse todo el día fuera, si era necesario. Al principio se dedicó a dar un buen repaso a Hyacinth por su larga ausencia, y a tratar como siempre de saber algo de lo que había estado haciendo. Él la escuchaba con toda tranquilidad, disfrutando de su charla que le daba la impresión de algo saludable y refrescante, y negándose en redondo a satisfacer su curiosidad. Alegaba, como había hecho otras veces, que si él no le pedía explicaciones, lo menos que podía esperar era tener derecho a que le dejasen en paz: y ni siquiera la indignación que producían en ella esas razones le hada creer que cualquier aclaración entre ellos pudiera ser una cosa seria. No había nada que aclarar ni nada que perdonar; eran un par de seres muy expuestos al error y unidos por sus debilidades mucho más que por cualquier fidelidad que pretendieran guardarse. Era una amistad muy vieja —ahora la más vieja de todas, exceptuando a mister Vetch, en la vida de Hyacinth— y, sin saber bien por qué, le inspiraba una gran indulgencia. La probabilidad de que la chica «alternara» con otros hombres había dejado de atormentar su imaginación; ya no le era necesario estar seguro de eso para ser feliz y poder quitársela de la cabeza. Podía ser igual de feliz sabiéndolo que sin saberlo, y se sentía muy modesto en cuanto a tener derecho a meterse en sus asuntos. Tenía tan pocos motivos para mostrarse severo con ella, que el que la joven se imaginara que ella *sí* tenía derecho a hacerle pedazos, no le parecía más que una parte de su perpetua pesadez, una pesadez que no resultaba placentera pero que, gracias a su espontaneidad, era una de las cosas que le gustaban de ella.

—Si no has venido a verme más que para bromas de mal gusto a costa mía, más te valía haberte quedado en casa —dijo con mucha dignidad cuando salían de Green Park—. En primer lugar es una grosería, en segundo lugar es una bobada, y en tercer lugar se te ve venir a una legua.

—Querida Milly, todo lo que haces, y el resentimiento que tienes, no son más que una polvareda que puedo barrer de un soplido —dijo Hyacinth—. Pero no importa, sigue diciendo lo que te apetezca. He venido a verte por gusto, para pasarlo bien sin tener que hacer un gran esfuerzo. No tenía grandes esperanzas de que me hicieras reír: he pasado una temporada muy triste. En realidad sigo estando triste. Me gustaría ser como tú. Mi alegría, como ves está un poco febril.

—La primera cosa que le pido a un amigo es que me respete —anunció la señorita Henning—. Llevas muy mala vida. Ya sé qué pensar de eso —añadió sin que se supiera muy bien por qué.

—¿Y va a ser a base de respetarte como deseas que la lleve mejor? Entonces hoy vamos a ahorrarnos otro tanto de mi perversidad. Vamos a pasear por la hierba —dijo Hyacinth—. Es inocente y bucólico sentirla bajo los pies. Da gusto estar contigo. Lo entiendes todo.

—No entiendo todo lo que dices, pero sí entiendo todo lo que ocultas —contestó la joven, mientras se abría ante ellos toda la parte central del parque, con la hierba intensamente verde.

—Pues pronto voy a convertirme en un misterio para ti, porque desde ahora voy a dejar de buscar refugio en el secreto. Ya no sabrás nada de mí, porque vas a tenerlo delante de tus narices.

—Bueno, no hay nada tan bonito como la naturaleza —declaró inesperadamente Millicent, al contemplar a las ovejas renegridas que pacían en los prados que se extienden desde Knightsbridge hasta Bayswater Road. Luego cambió de repente—: ¿Qué quieres que le haga si eres tan malo que no puedes ni ir a la tienda?

Y cuando él preguntó por qué iba a ser tan malo como para hacer eso, dijo que veía que era verdad que tenía fiebre: no se había dado cuenta antes porque nunca tenía más color que un queso. ¿Era algo que había pescado en uno de esos suburbios por los que siempre andaba metiéndose con sus ideas de loco? Le estaba bien empleado no sacar mejores cosas que las que nunca habían salido de ellos. ¿Se ocuparían sus amigos —¡menuda pandilla eran todos ellos que siempre le dejaban lo peor para él!—, se ocuparían ahora de buscarle el médico, y el vino, y el dinero, y todo lo que iba a necesitar cuando tuviera que estarse en la cama, a lo mejor varios meses, por haberle metido todas esas ideas en la cabeza y metérselas él a otros que tampoco podían con ellas? Se paró en la hierba, a la luz pálida del sol, y le miró con unos ojos en los que él vio una curiosidad nueva, una luz decidida y amistosa, un calor y una promesa de más estrecha camaradería. De repente, exclamó, abandonando el tono de burla que había empleado un momento antes:

—¡Ay, pillo, a ti te pasa algo! ¿Te ha dado la patada tu princesa?

—Hija mía, tu forma de hablar es una mezcla rarísima —suspiró Hyacinth resignado—. Pero puede que sí. En todo caso, no es más rara que mi vida.

—¡Vaya, me alegro de que lo reconozcas! —dijo Millicent, al tiempo que echaba a andar entre un revuelo de lazos.

—¡Tus ideas sobre mis ideas! —gimió Hyacinth—. Sí, tendrías que verme en los suburbios. Si soy más filisteo que tú, señorita Henning.

—Tienes un surtido de nombres más ridículo, si es eso lo que quieres decir. Creo que la mitad de las veces ni tú mismo entiendes lo que estás diciendo. No creo siquiera que sepas lo que piensas después de tanto pensar. Ésa es tu enfermedad.

—Es asombroso cómo aciertas a veces a dar en el clavo —contestó él por no quedarse atrás—. No tengo intención de pensar más, ya lo he dejado. Déjalo tú también, hija, déjalo como si fuera un feo vicio. No le hace a uno feliz. Vamos a dedicarnos a la contemplación irreflexiva, vamos a vivir el momento presente.

—No me importa cómo vivo ni dónde vivo, mientras pueda vivir como me apetezca. Pero conmigo nunca te has portado realmente bien, como un amigo debe hacerlo con otro —prosiguió, volviendo sin poder evitarlo a lo concreto, y mirándole otra vez con aquel agrado tan grande, que no tenía motivos para temer exhibirse a plena luz—. ¿Te acuerdas de aquel día que volví al Plice, hace mucho tiempo, y fui a ver a la pobre *miss* Pynsent (no podía tragarme, nunca me entendió) y esperé a que llegaras y luego fuimos a dar un paseo y a tomar el té juntos? Bueno, pues no me importa decirte que ni siquiera aquella noche te portaste bien, y que me considero más que buena por no habértelo tenido en cuenta. Siempre has tratado de hacer como si le dijeras a una todo, y la verdad es que no me has dicho nunca nada.

—Pero ¿qué quieres que te diga, mi vida? —preguntó Hyacinth, cogiéndola del brazo—. Estoy dispuesto a decirte todo lo que quieras.

—Apostaría a que no vas a decirme más que mentiras. Pero yo sí que he intentado ser buena contigo —declaró Millicent.

—Inténtalo otra vez; no desistas —dijo su amigo, que seguía andando muy agarrado a ella.

Se paró y se soltó de su brazo, aunque no enfadada:

—¡Venga, entonces! ¿Te ha mandado a paseo?

Hyacinth desvió los ojos; se puso a mirar el prado, brumoso y soleado, y las figuras desperdigadas que parecían hacerlo más grande; los árboles que bordeaban el parque, hasta más allá del foso cubierto de hierba; el cauce brillante del Serpentine, a uno de los lados, y las fachadas lejanas de Bayswater, realzadas por el buen tiempo y la vista privilegiada de que disfrutaban al otro:

—¡Pues me parece que sí! —comentó por fin.

—¡Qué mala bestia! —exclamó ella, mientras echaban a andar. Algo más de una hora después estaban sentados bajo los grandes árboles de Kensington, los que están desparramados por la ladera que se levanta suavemente desde la orilla del agua, en la parte más alejada del viejo palacio rojo. Habían tomado posesión de un par de sillas de las que están allí a disposición de esa parte del público para la que un penique no es algo prohibitivo, y Millicent, en una de esas especulaciones que la caracterizaban, había dedicado no poco tiempo a hacer conjeturas sobre si vendría o no el hombre que tenía que cobrar el penique. A la señorita Henning le gustaba disfrutar de las cosas gratis, y ver que los demás hacían lo mismo, y hasta eso de sentarse en una silla de un penique le impresionaba en proporción a la sensación que le daba de estar invirtiendo algo. El hombre llegó, a pesar de todo, y entonces ya no le quedaba más consuelo que estar sentada el mayor tiempo posible para sacarle el jugo al dinero. La cuestión estaba ya saldada, y habían aparecido otras dos o tres de mucho más peso. En el momento de que hablamos estaba inclinada hacia delante, ansiosa y atenta, con las manos cruzadas sobre la falda, y con todas sus innumerables pulseras de plata arracimadas sobre las muñecas. Tenía los labios un poco entreabiertos, y los ojos llenos de dulzura, y una expresión en la cara que Hyacinth no le había visto nunca hasta entonces y que le llevó a decir:

—¡Ay, Milly, después de todo eres una delicia de chica!

—¿Por qué no se te ha ocurrido decírmelo antes… hace años?

—¡Siempre está uno a tiempo de decir tonterías! No sé qué es lo que me ha entrado hoy para ablandarme tanto… aquí sentado en un sitio tan agradable, con un aire que huele tan bien, un montón de sugestiones y sin tener nada que hacer. La historia es odiosa, y la he tenido guardada mucho tiempo. En cualquiera otra ocasión hubiera supuesto para mí un esfuerzo imposible no hacerlo. Pero ahora no he necesitado hacer ningún esfuerzo; y no me cabe duda de que si he hablado así ha sido sólo porque el aire es suave, y el sitio muy decorativo, y es un día de fiesta, y tu persona resulta adorable y tu presencia muy conmovedora. Todo eso ha hecho el mismo efecto que cuando metes algo en un vaso de agua y… se desborda. Sólo que en mi caso no es agua, es un líquido bastante más sucio. ¡Perdona el mal olor!

La cara de Millicent se había sonrojado un poco al oír todas esas cosas; aún no se le había pasado y, como un poco de color, refinado por el sentimiento, nunca le sienta mal a una mujer guapa, su insólita expresión salía favorecida:

—No habría sido tan dura contigo —dijo.

—¡Si eso no es ser dura, Milly! —protestó Hyacinth.

—Estás temblando de pies a cabeza —le cogió la mano, como si fuera una enfermera que le estuviera tomando el pulso.

—Es muy probable. Soy un animalillo muy nervioso.

—Cualquiera se pondría nervioso de pensar en una cosa tan horrible. ¡Y si eres tú mismo! —el gesto de la chica expresaba todo el horror de semejante contingencia—. Tú necesitas cariño —añadió en un tono que le sentó muy mal a Hyacinth; las palabras sonaban a prescripción facultativa.

—Una cucharada cada media hora —dijo Hyacinth, y retuvo su mano, que ella estaba a punto de retirar.

—Tú también hubieras sido mejor.

—¿Qué hubiera sido mejor, qué quieres decir?

—Bueno, me gustas como eres ahora —dijo Millicent, que esa vez sí que retiró la mano, como para recobrar la dignidad después de esa declaración.

—Es una lástima que siempre haya tenido que estar bajo la influencia de las mujeres —suspiró Hyacinth, cruzándose de brazos.

Se sorprendió ante la delicadeza con que contestó ella:

—No debes olvidar que tenían que hacer mucho para compensarte.

—¿Te refieres a mi madre? Si la hubiesen dejado, ella lo habría hecho. Pero es el sexo en general el que ha sido muy bueno conmigo. Es increíble el cariño que me han demostrado y lo que he podido disfrutar con su compañía.

Sería averiguar demasiado meterse a decir que aquella referencia a otras fuentes de consuelo que no

eran las nacidas en su propio pecho tuvo un efecto irritante sobre Millicent; en todo caso, respondió preguntándole:

—¿Lo sabe ella, tu despampanante princesa?

—Sí, pero no le importa.

—¡Qué extraordinaria bondad de su parte! —exclamó la joven con una carcajada.

—Me molesta muchísimo —comentó Hyacinth, aunque sin llegar a enfadarse— oírte dedicarle esos epítetos de envidia. No sabes nada de ella.

—¿Cómo sabes lo que yo sé, dime? —Hizo la pregunta con su natural agresividad, pero en seguida bajó la voz al acordarse de la gran desgracia—: ¿No te ha tratado de una forma vergonzosa, y más a ti, que eres un chico tan simpático?

—De ninguna manera. Soy yo el que podría decir que no se ha portado bien con ella. Hizo amistad conmigo porque me interesaban las mismas cosas que le interesaban a ella. Su interés se ha mantenido, ha aumentado, mientras que el mío, por una u otra razón, ha ido bajando. Ella ha sido consecuente, y yo he cambiado como un imbécil.

—¿Que ha bajado tu interés por la princesa? —preguntó Millicent, que no acababa de entender aquella declaración tan complicada.

—¡No, mujer, no! Me refiero a algunas opiniones que yo mantenía antes —contestó Hyacinth.

Y podía haber hablado de otros muchos manejos de los que, en un momento dado, había hecho todo lo posible por que le relevasen.

—¡Ah, sí, cuando creías que había que dárselo todo a los más pobres! ¡Menudo negocio! —y la risa de la señorita Henning parecía indicar que, después de todo, las opiniones de Hyacinth y los cambios de sus puntos de vista no eran lo más importante—: ¿Y tu gran señora se dedica todavía a los vendedores ambulantes?

—Quiere llegar a comprender el gran problema de la miseria material; quiere hacer algo para conseguir que esa miseria disminuya. A mí no me importan los métodos que sigue y no me gusta lo que hace. Pero cuando pienso en lo que hay que hacer, en la valentía y el entusiasmo de los que se dedican a ello, me parece algunas veces que con tantas reservas y escrúpulos no soy más que un pobre diablo.

—Sí, un pobre diablo si eres capaz de quedarte ahí sentado y echándote todas esas acusaciones encima —dijo la chica indignada—. Pero si tú no tienes ánimos, te aseguro que yo los tengo por los dos. ¿Si no te ha dado una patada, qué sentido tiene que dijeras hace un momento que sí lo había hecho? Y además, ¿por qué se te ha puesto tu cara bonita más blanca que mis medias?

Hyacinth la miró un momento sin contestar, como si le calmara su violencia:

—No sé, no lo entiendo.

Ella le cogió la mano, y la retuvo como si quisiera contenerse, como si buscara en su contacto algo que pudiera ayudarle. Los dos estaban callados, mirando el agua y el paisaje de los jardines que se reflejaba en ella, hasta que Milly volvió a mirarle y dijo:

—Pues yo habría hecho lo mismo con él.

Hyacinth tardó un momento en comprender que aludía a la venganza sobre lord Frederick:

—No hables de eso; no vas a volver a oírme una palabra de eso en mi vida. No se sabe nada.

—Siempre supe que eras un señor —dijo la chica con toda seguridad.

—Una variedad muy extraña, *cara mia* —contestó su compañero, y no con mucha inocencia, pues ya conocemos las teorías que había cultivado sobre ese punto—. Claro que habías oído los disparates de la pobre Pinnie. Cuando vivía, me sacaban de quicio, pero ahora se lo he perdonado. Ya era hora de que lo hiciese, si empiezo a hablar yo mismo. Me parece que me estoy viniendo abajo.

—Si no era *miss* Pynsent; eras tú.

—¿Y qué fue lo que dije yo en aquellos días?

—No era lo que decías —contestó ella—. Adiviné todo el asunto (salvo que había muerto y que te habían llevado a verla, claro), el mismo día en que volví al Plice. ¿No te diste cuenta de que andaba dándole vueltas? ¿Y te lo he echado en cara alguna vez, por muchas palabras que hayamos tenido? Por eso, lo que digo ahora es lo mismo que pensaba entonces. Eso sólo hace que me gustes más.

Era ordinaria, vulgar, hasta tenía el vicio de exagerarlo todo, porque ni él mismo podía entender cómo la situación que había descrito podía favorecerle. Pero cuando el fondo afectuoso que tenía salía a la superficie, parecía derramar un calor que era un descanso, casi una protección, que daba más calidad a su bucolismo barato, a su entreacto en una semana de agobiador trabajo; de forma que, aunque ninguno de los dos había comido se habría pasado la tarde entera, allí sentado con ella, tan contento. Parecía una pausa en algo cruel que le estaba ocurriendo lo hacía todo más fácil, y lo alejaba de momento. Sus pensamientos

giraban siempre en torno a lo mismo con una terquedad agotadora, pero ahora estaban en suspenso y le dolían con cierta indiferencia. Sería demasiado decir que la compañía de Millicent fuera una compensación, mas por lo menos era un recurso. Ella, sin duda alguna, disfrutaba también, no hablaba para nada de volver. Le preguntó por la familia de su padre y comentó que era una vergüenza que le hubieran dejado seguir así sin mover por él ni un dedo; y declaró con palabras que pretendían halagarle, por la indignación que había en ellas, pero que le hicieron sonreír por la torpeza con que las dijo, que de haber formado ella parte de esa pretenciosa caterva no habría podido aguantar la idea de que un pariente viviera con tanta pobreza. Hyacinth sabía lo que pensaba la señorita Henning de su trabajo en él taller de Crook, y del pobre papel que hacía un chico con sus cualidades, contentándose con un empleo que no era después de todo más que una forma de ganarse la vida con el trabajo de sus manos. Tenía que ver con los libros, pero también tenía que ver con ellos el chico que los llevaba a casa de los compradores; y Millicent nunca había llegado a descubrir la diferencia que pudiera haber entre su arte y el de un fontanero o guarnicionero. No había olvidado el disgusto que le dio el día que le dijo que llevaba un mandil; ella miraba todas esas cosas desde una altura mucho mayor, pues lo que se ponía eran abrigos y chaquetas y chales, y todos los vestidos que se exhibían en los escaparates sobre maniquís de alambre, y que se sacaban de allí para transferirlos a su ondulante persona, y encima no tenía que dar ni una puntada para hacerlos, y su único trabajo era hablar de ellos, y enseñarlos, y convencer a la gente —que se quedaba con la boca abierta— de lo bonitos y lo baratos que eran. Siempre había sido para ella una inagotable fuente de consuelo, en su ardua evolución, no haber tenido que trabajar nunca con las manos. Hyacinth respondía a sus preguntas, como ella había respondido hacía mucho tiempo a las suyas, preguntándole qué era lo que «su familia» le debía al hijo de una persona que les había llevado el crimen y el dolor a sus sublimes alturas, y si creía que eso era una recomendación para él. Millicent, de momento, quedó un poco cortada, pero en seguida contestó:

—Bueno, pues si tu posición era tan mala, ¿no tenían ellos muchos más motivos para haberte echado una mano? ¡Nada, es una cosa cruel! —dijo, y luego añadió que ella en su lugar se las habría arreglado para hacer que se enterasen de que existía. Ella no se habría pasado la vida trabajando en Soho si sabía que llevaba en las venas la sangre de la mitad de los pares de Inglaterra—. Si te hubieran conocido, les habrías gustado —tuvo la bondad de comentar.

Claro que no tardó en decir también que en ese caso habría estado muy por encima de ella y fuera de su alcance. No quería decir que sería ella la que le hubiera dejado, a pesar de lo poco que siempre había sacado de él. En ese caso, sí que habría estado con aristócratas «de verdad», y puso especial énfasis en esa distinción como indirecta a la señora de Madeira Crescent, un artificio algo gastado, pues Hyacinth estaba convencido de que le había sacado a Sholto una historia bastante detallada de la princesa. Millicent se mostró tierna y dulcemente juguetona, y él quedó extrañado de la poca impresión que le había hecho la humildad de su origen: le parecía un accidente mucho menos grave de lo que él había pensado siempre. Se sintió conmovida y emocionada, pero lo que más la conmovió fue la historia de la espantosa venganza de su madre, su larga prisión, y la visita que había hecho de pequeño a la cárcel, junto con el posterior descubrimiento del extraño lugar que ocupaba en el mundo. Todo eso produjo en ella una agitación generosa, algo parecido a la emoción que había sentido algunas veces al leer con trabajo *Family Herald*. Lo que más la impresionó, y lo que sacaba a relucir con más frecuencia, fue todo lo referente a lord Frederick y al misterio de que Hyacinth hubiese sacado tan poco provecho de su parentesco con ese señor. No podía comprender que su amigo no hubiera hecho algo, aunque lo que podían haber hecho ellos tampoco acababa de verlo muy claro. Resultaba la cosa más curiosa del mundo ver que no ponía en duda que, de no haber sido por su inutilidad, podía haber transformado todo el espantoso episodio en una fuente de distinción, de gloria y de provecho. ¡Ella no habría sido hija de un noble para nada! Y serlo por la mano izquierda daba igual que serlo por la derecha; a ella, de momento, no le importaba nada. El largo silencio de Hyacinth era lo que más la asombraba, no podía llevarlo con paciencia y se maravillaba con toda candidez de que no se hubiese jactado de su alcurnia. Las generaciones que la representaban resultaban vivas y concretas comparadas con las sombras que la pobre Pinnie había puesto de cuando en cuando en circulación. Millicent se estrellaba contra su oculto pasado con la más absurda mezcla de crítica y entusiasmo, y con unas intenciones muy buenas, que hacían el efecto de voces irreverentes que despertaran a gritos sagrados ecos.

—¿Sólo a mí y a ella? Pues tendría que estar muy agradecida, a pesar de lo que has tardado. Supongo que se lo contaste la primera vez que la viste, aquella noche que fuiste a su palco en el teatro, ¿no? Estoy segura de que ella tenía cosas peores que contarte si, por una vez en la vida, hubiera dicho la verdad. ¿Y quieres decir que no se lo has contado nunca a ese amigo tuyo que se dedica a la química?

—No, no hemos hablado nunca de eso.

—¡Los hombres son unos seres bien raros! —exclamó Millicent—. ¿Pero ni siquiera lo mencionaste alguna vez?

—No hacía falta. Lo sabía ya de otra manera, lo supo por su hermana.

—¿Y cómo lo sabes si no te ha hablado nunca?

—¡Ah, porque fue muy bueno conmigo!

—Bueno, me imagino que eso no le ha arruinado —replicó Millicent—. ¿Y cómo lo supo su hermana?

—No lo sé. Supongo que lo adivinó.

La joven le miró asombrada y luego soltó un bufido:

—No tenía por qué meterse en eso. ¿*Fue* muy bueno contigo? ¿Ya no es bueno ahora?

Millicent hizo esa pregunta con su voz decidida y fuerte, que resonó en la quietud del parque.

Hyacinth tardó un poco en contestar y, cuando por fin se decidió a hacerlo, lo hizo sin mirarla:

—No lo sé, no puedo adivinarlo.

—¡Pues yo sí que puedo! —Le hizo volverse hacia ella, y le examinó con sus grandes y luminosos ojos—. ¡Qué tonto eres, hijo!, ¿ha estado tomándote el pelo?

Le apremiaba con su curiosidad; le preguntó si era eso lo que le había hecho cambiar de idea. No recibió respuesta alguna de sus labios, pero ella no tardó en encontrarla en su cara:

—Ha estado trabajándose a su Alteza Serenísima, ¿es a eso a lo que juega? ¿Y tú crees que ella iba a mirar a un tipo como ése?

—¿Un tipo como ése? Es un hombre como el mejor que pueda andar por ahí —dijo Hyacinth—. Tienen las mismas ideas, están haciendo el mismo trabajo.

—¿Así que no ha cambiado de opinión, no ha hecho como tú?

—No, él sabe lo que quiere; sabe lo que piensa.

—El «mismo trabajo». ¡Menuda si deben de estar haciendo el mismo! —dijo Millicent en tono de burla —. Sabe lo que quiere, y me atrevería a decir que va a conseguirlo.

Hyacinth se había levantado y le daba la espalda; pero ella también se levantó y le cogió del brazo:

—Es asunto suyo, pueden hacer lo que les apetezca.

—No intentes hacerte el santo; acabas con mi paciencia —contestó la chica con su característica energía —: Son una pareja de cuidado, y me gustaría oírtelo decir.

—Un hombre no debe ponerse en contra de sus amigos —insistió él sentencioso, y sin saber a qué agarrarse.

—Son ellos los que tienen que acordarse de eso; no hay peligro de que lo olvides.

Habían empezado a andar, pero ella le hizo pararse; sonreía, y le miraba con una cara radiante. Le dijo de repente con cariñosa inconsecuencia:

—Todos esos horrores que has contado… sólo han servido para que me gustes más.

—Pues no lo comprendo, pero desde luego sí que han servido para que tú me gustes más a mí. Eres un consuelo, Milly —dijo Hyacinth mientras seguían andando.

Poco después de lo cual, aprovechando la protección que ofrecía el tronco de un árbol, lo bastante grande y lo bastante conveniente, le había pasado el brazo por la cintura y la había ido llevando hacia él más y más cerca, tan cerca que, cuando volvieron a pararse, sintió que se rendía con una especie de delicada firmeza y con todo el peso de su cariño.

XLII

No tenía intención de ir más tarde a Madeira Crescent, y por eso, antes de separarse, preguntó a Millicent si podría volver a verla después del té. Las noches eran más amargas para él y las temía de antemano. La oscuridad se había transformado en un motivo de pesadilla; le traía visiones que pasaban ante sus ojos aunque los tuviera cerrados: dudas crueles, y miedos y sospechas, sugerencias de mal y revelaciones de dolor. Necesitaba compañía para aliviar su tristeza, y eso era lo que le había hecho volver a Millicent, aunque fuera de una forma que no estaba muy de acuerdo con el respeto que todavía creía deberle a su parte más noble. Ya no se sentía con derecho a presentarse en el Crescent, y trataba de convencerse, en el caso de que su desconfianza fuera exagerada, de que sus razones eran razones magnánimas. Si Paul estaba de verdad ocupado con la princesa, si tenían entre manos un trabajo que requería toda su atención (y el domingo tenía muchas probabilidades de ser el día elegido: eran muchos los domingos que habían pasado juntos) su ausencia podía obedecer a un motivo superior al de dejarle el campo libre a su amigo. Había para él algo sumamente significativo en la forma en que ese amigo había decidido de repente volver a entrar en la casa, después de haber estado un rato fuera de ella con su dueña, y en el momento en que él y el príncipe estaban mirando a través de la niebla. Aquella escena se repetía en su memoria innumerables veces, y le sugería cosas que le resultaba insoportable saber. Hyacinth tenía miedo de estar celoso aún después de haber llegado a estarlo, y para demostrarse a sí mismo que no era verdad había ido a ver a la princesa un día de entre semana. Si durante meses y meses había deseado que Paul la conociera, ¿cómo iba a alimentar un sentimiento tan vil ante la primera manifestación de una intimidad que descansaba, por ambas partes, en aspiraciones que él respetaba? Aquel día la princesa no estaba en casa, y Hyacinth se había marchado sin preguntar por *madame* Grandoni: no había olvidado que en su anterior visita se le había ocurrido una disculpa para no quedarse en el salón. Después que la doncellita de Crescent le dijera que su señora había salido se había marchado de allí con una viva curiosidad; una curiosidad que, de haberla escuchado, le habría llevado a coger el primer ómnibus que pasara en dirección a Camberwell. ¿También estaría fuera Paul Muniment, que en general resultaba un tipo raro para eso de quedarse en casa por las noches, y le apetecería en ese caso a Rosy —que por fuerza tenía que saberlo— decir adonde había ido? Hyacinth dejó pasar el ómnibus, pues en seguida se dio cuenta de que estaba a punto de convertirse en espía. Desde entonces no había vuelto a ver a Muniment, porque quería mantener su curiosidad insatisfecha. Lo que sí se permitía observar era que la princesa no le había escrito ni una palabra de consuelo, como solía hacerlo en otros tiempos cuando llamaba a su puerta sin encontrarla. Eran ya dos veces seguidas que no la encontraba, y no había dado muestra alguna de sentirlo, de sentirlo al menos por él. Eso le decidió a esperar todavía un poco más: era prueba de que sus ocupaciones la tenían absorbida. Lo que Hyacinth había podido ver de ella mientras hablaba con su amigo —más bien con el suyo— a la vuelta de la excursión descrita por el príncipe, la imagen obsesionante de Paul cruzando el umbral una vez más, no dejaba lugar a dudas sobre el grado de absorción alcanzado.

Por otra parte Millicent no se mostró muy propicia al proponerle que terminaran el día juntos. Sonrió, desde luego, y sus maravillosos ojos se posaron en los suyos con una expresión de indulgente asombro: parecían preguntar si valdría la pena, dada la probable incredulidad de Hyacinth, mencionar la verdadera razón de no tener el gusto de acceder a su demanda. Si era seguro que iba a burlarse de la explicación, ¿no podría inventar cualquier excusa, algo que pudiera tomar a broma sin herirla? No es posible afirmar qué fue lo que decidió la señorita Henning; pero acabó por confesar que era una lástima que hubiera un obstáculo que les impidiese encontrarse más tarde, la promesa que había hecho de ir a ver a una amiga, la directora de su departamento, que tenía que quedarse en casa y no sabía cómo pasar el rato. Le había prometido pasar la noche con ella, y no era persona que pudiera faltar a esa clase de promesas. Hyacinth no hizo ningún comentario; escuchó la declaración en silencio, mirando con tristeza a la chica.

—Ya sé lo que estás pensando —dijo Millicent de repente—. ¿Por qué no lo dices para darme la oportunidad de contradecirte? No debía importarme, pero sí me importa.

—¡Calla, calla, no discutamos! —Hablaba en un tono cansado y suplicante; nunca le había oído hablar así.

Millicent se limitó a comentar:

—Estoy tentada de hacerle una jugada. Es una verdadera señora, muy bien relacionada, y la mejor amiga que tengo (sin contar a los amigos, claro), y no haría una cosa así por nadie en el mundo, a no ser por ti.

—No, cumple tu promesa; no le hagas jugadas a nadie —dijo Hyacinth.

—Muy bien, *eres* un caballero —contestó con una dulzura especial que a veces aparecía en su voz.

—Especialmente… —empezó a decir Hyacinth, pero sin terminar la frase.

—¿Especialmente qué? Apostaría cualquier cosa a que es alguna indecencia. ¿Especialmente porque no me crees?

—¡Que no! ¡No nos peleemos! —volvió a decir Hyacinth.

—¿Pelearnos, amor mío? Yo me pelearía por ti —declaró Millicent.

Después del té, se ofreció a sí mismo la elección entre una visita a *lady* Aurora o una peregrinación a Lisson Grove. Albergaba algunas dudas con respecto al primer experimento, pues le parecía que la familia de su señoría podía estar ya de vuelta en Belgrave Square. Pensó, sin embargo, que ésa no era una razón para no ir a verla; sus relaciones con ella no tenían nada de misteriosas, y le había invitado a visitarla cuando quisiera. Si sus linajudos padres estaban en casa, lo más probable era que cenara con ellos, pero podía correr el riesgo. Ya lo había hecho otras veces, y sin resultados desastrosos. Estaba decidido a no pasar la noche solo, y reservaría la visita a los Poupin como alternativa más segura, en el caso de que *lady* Aurora no pudiera recibirle.

Nada más ver abrirse ante él las grandes puertas de Belgrave Square comprendió que la casa estaba concurrida y animada, si es que podía hablarse de animación en un lugar que hasta entonces siempre le había parecido un magnífico mausoleo. Estaba llena de luz difusa y de criados altos; se vio contemplando una especie de columnata de sirvientes colosales, un despliegue aún más imponente que el séquito de la princesa en Medley. La pregunta se le murió en los labios, y se quedó allí de pie, luchando con su mudez. Estaba claro que se celebraba una fiesta por todo lo alto, y su presencia en ella no podía ser más que un borrón; y cuando un criado alto, que no llevaba librea, se inclinó hacia él en espera de una voz que no salía, y le dijo en una forma no desalentadora que quizá era a *lady* Aurora a quien deseaba ver, contestó imparcial y desesperado:

—Sí, sí, pero veo que es imposible.

El criado no se molestó en rechazar esa suposición verbalmente; dio media vuelta con aire majestuoso como para conducirle y, como en ese mismo momento otros dos criados cerraron tras él las dos hojas de la puerta, Hyacinth comprendió que aquello era la señal de que debía seguirle. De esa forma, después de atravesar un corredor, donde entre el perfecto silencio de los criados oía resonar el crujido de sus plebeyos zapatos sobre el suelo de mármol, se vio introducido en una habitación pequeña, alumbrada por una lámpara, en la que su guía le dejó solo, sin decirle una palabra más, y que pronto reconoció, aunque estaba mucho más adornada, como el sitio en que había tenido lugar una de sus primeras entrevistas. *Lady* Aurora le hizo esperar un poco, pero apareció por fin entre un revuelo de incoherentes disculpas. Su aspecto había sufrido la misma transformación que la mansión paterna: llevaba un vestido de color claro, más bien arrugado y ligeramente crujiente, la cabeza adornada con una pluma lánguida, que terminaba en unos puntitos color de rosa, y un par de guantes blancos en la mano. Toda su ansiedad reprimida se reflejaba en su cara, y sonreía como queriendo anticiparse a cualquier escrúpulo o embarazo que pudiera sentir el visitante; sin ocultar que se sentía disfrazada y que el verla con tanto aderezo podía desconcertarle. Hyacinth le dijo que comprendía que debía haberse marchado al ver que había vuelto su familia, que sabía que eso debía representar una gran diferencia en su vida. Pero le habían metido allí a pesar de sus protestas, y comprendía que la había interrumpido mientras estaba cenando. Ella contestó que no se despedía nunca a alguien que preguntara por ella a cualquier hora que fuese; había conseguido que se hiciera así, y estaba muy contenta del éxito. Normalmente no cenaba; eran muchos y llevaba mucho tiempo. Muchos de sus amigos no podían ir en horas de visita, y no estaría bien no poder recibirlos. En aquella ocasión sí había estado cenando, pero ya había terminado; se había quedado allí porque había de ir a una fiesta. Sus padres cenaban fuera, y ella estaba en el salón con algunas de sus hermanas. Cuando estaban solas la cena no duraba tanto tiempo, aunque lo que sí duraba mucho era lo que venía después. Pero todavía no era hora: el coche tardaría casi media hora en ir a buscarlas. No había asistido a una fiesta

desde hacía meses y meses, pero algunas veces había que hacerlo. *Lady* Aurora expresó la idea de que había que ser amable con todo el mundo, y que los deberes de cada uno no eran siempre de la misma especie; en ocasiones se presentaban algunos que eran completamente distintos. Había que cumplirlos todos, y por eso estaba dispuesta a ir esa noche. No era nada importante, sólo una reunión familiar, como las que solían hacer los domingos en una de sus casas. Era allí donde estaban cenando sus padres. Como le habían dado aquella habitación para la hora que ella quisiera —y realmente era estupenda—, había decidido asistir de cuando en cuando a una fiesta, como una señorita respetable, porque sabía que les gustaba; aunque lo que no podía imaginar era por qué producía semejante conmoción el verla en algún sitio. Suponía que quizá fuera para evitar que algunos pensaran que estaba loca y que campaba por sus respetos, cosa que desde luego no le gustaba a la gente que hicieran sus allegados. *Lady* Aurora daba explicaciones y se extendía sobre el tema con un anhelo desbordante; hablaba sin parar, como nunca lo había hecho ante Hyacinth, y el chico comprendía que no acababa de estar, por así decirlo, en sus cabales. Le parecía poco probable que estuviera tan excitada ante la simple idea de volver a meterse en el gran mundo que ella misma había abandonado, y no tardó en comprender que era él quien la había trastornado. Su sentido era lo bastante fino para darle a entender que existían asociaciones y heridas que su presencia revivía y agudizaba. De repente dejó de hablar, y los dos se quedaron callados, mirándose el uno al otro, en una extraña y oculta comunidad de sufrimiento. Él hizo algunas observaciones mecánicas, intentó explicar por qué había ido, y al cabo de muy pocos minutos, sin que tuviera nada que ver con esas observaciones, tuvo la impresión de que había una confianza profunda, una increíblemente profunda confianza entre los dos. Una confesión tácita iba y venía una y otra vez, y los dos comprendían la situación del otro. No hablarían nunca de ella, estaba claro que no lo harían; porque había algo en la conciencia de ambos que no se avenía con la rudeza de la acusación. Además, el dolor de cada uno de ellos era sólo una aprensión, un instinto del alma, no un daño claro y definido apoyado en una prueba. Era algo que estaba en el aire, que aparecía latente en su inquietud, no en algo que pudieran mostrar o de lo que pudieran quejarse para consuelo. Por extraño que pareciese, tenía la impresión de que la historia de cada uno podía ser la contrapartida de la del otro. ¿Qué había hecho cada uno de ellos sino perder lo que él o ella no habían llegado a tener nunca? Las cosas habían ido mal para ellos; pero aunque hubieran ido bien, aunque la princesa no se hubiera puesto de acuerdo con su amigo en aquella forma que le acongojaba y que producía el mismo efecto en el corazón de *lady* Aurora, aun en ese caso, ¿qué habrían podido proporcionar el acierto o el éxito? Habrían resultado estériles. Estaba seguro de que aquella singular persona que tenía ante él no habría tenido nunca la oportunidad de dar el paso sin precedentes que estaba dispuesta a dar aunque le costara tener que salir de Belgrave Square para siempre; Hyacinth había comprendido que los deseos que Paul Muniment tenía de semejante complicación eran muy pequeños, y había empezado a compadecer a su señoría desde hacía mucho tiempo. Y cuando sentía más que nunca la dulzura de su simpatía, se preguntaba qué habría imaginado para él en el caso de no haber sido suplantado, qué seguridad, qué promoción tan completa, qué consecuencias honrosas y satisfactorias. Se sentían desgraciados porque eran desgraciados, y tenían razón en no quejarse.

—Me alegro de verle, me gusta hablar con usted —fue todo lo que comentó ella.

Estuvieron hablando un cuarto de hora, y la visita que Hyacinth le hizo fue la que un caballero cumplido podía hacerle a una gentil señorita. Hicieron comentarios sobre el retraso de la primavera, sobre la exposición celebrada en Burlington House —por la que Hyacinth había pagado un chelín—, sobre la cuestión de abrir los museos en domingo, y sobre el peligro de mimar demasiado la legislación en favor de las clases trabajadoras. Él declaró que se alegraba mucho de ver que se divertía un poco, que era antinatural no hacerlo, y que esperaba que ya que se había decidido seguiría adelante. Ella, al oírlo, sonrió, contempló sus moderadas galas y dijo:

—A lo mejor empezaré a ir a algún baile, ¿quién sabe?

—Eso es lo que piensan nuestros amigos de Audley Court, ya sabe que el mayor error que puede cometerse es no apurar la copa mientras se tiene.

—¡Entonces lo haré, lo haré por ellos! —exclamó *lady* Aurora—. Me atrevería a decir que, en lo referente a todo eso, no los he escuchado todo lo que debía.

Ésa fue la única alusión que se hizo a propósito de los Muniment.

Hyacinth se levantó; le parecía que había estado bastante tiempo si ella tenía que marcharse y, en el momento de darle la mano, tuvo la sensación de que era una heroína. Iba a intentar cultivar las diversiones propias de su clase si les parecía bien al hermano y a la hermana de Audley Court, hasta iba a intentar convertirse en una mujer elegante para consolarse. Paul Muniment no se preocupaba de ella, pero era capaz de pensar que quizá fuera su deber regular su vida de acuerdo con el mismo consejo que abría un abismo

entre los dos.

Hyacinth no creía en el éxito de ese intento; ante su imaginación pasaba el cuadro de la pobre *lady* volviendo a casa y quitándose las plumas para siempre, después de haber pasado la noche contemplando la agitación de la sala de baile, desde el extremo del círculo y con cara de no entender una palabra.

—Comamos y bebamos, que mañana moriremos —dijo Hyacinth riendo.

—A mí no me importa morir.

—Creo que a mí sí —declaró Hyacinth, mientras se disponía a salir.

No se había mencionado para nada a la princesa.

Todavía era bastante pronto para arriesgarse a hacer una visita a Lisson Grove; suponía que los Poupin aún estarían levantados. Cuando llegó a la casa comprendió que la suposición estaba justificada; el brillo de la luz que se veía en la ventana parecía anunciar que *madame* tenía una reunión. Subió en seguida la escalera —el visitante tenía permiso para abrir por sí mismo la puerta— y, después de llamar, obedeció la invitación a entrar de la dueña. Poupin y su mujer estaban sentados con otra tercera persona en torno a una mesa que había en el centro de la habitación, alumbrada por una lámpara de petróleo cubierta por un globo de cristal, que despedía una luz muy viva, y cuya transparencia estaba mitigada por una cenefa de racimos de uvas. La tercera persona era su amigo Schinkel, que era uno de los miembros del pequeño grupo que había ido a visitar a Hoffendahl aquella noche negra y lluviosa. Ninguno de los tres dijo nada, pero se levantaron en silencio y le miraron como él había creído notar que le miraban en otras ocasiones, sólo que nunca de un modo tan inconfundible.

Libro VI

XLIII

—Hijo mío, eres siempre bien venido —dijo Eustache Poupin, cogiendo la mano de Hyacinth y reteniéndola entre las suyas unos momentos.

El joven, nada más entrar, había tenido la impresión de que estaban hablando de él antes de que apareciera y que hubieran preferido seguir hablando sin testigos. Llegó a creer ver en la cara de Poupin esa expresión que aparece cuando a uno le descubren o al menos le interrumpen en el momento de hacer algo indigno. Sin embargo, con Poupin era muy difícil saberlo: tenía siempre un aire tan exaltado, tan de conspirador que desafía la llegada de la justicia. Hyacinth se fijó en los otros; estaban de pie, como si hubieran escamoteado algo de encima de la mesa, como si hubieran estado dedicados a falsificar moneda. Poupin seguía cogiéndole la mano; los ojos del francés, ardientes, fijos y sin pestañear, expresaban siempre la grandeza de la ocasión, cualquiera que esa ocasión fuera, y nunca le habían parecido tan a punto de salírsele de la cabeza.

—Querido amigo mío, *nous causions justement de vous* —comentó Eustache, como si fuera algo realmente extraordinario.

—*Oh!, nous causions, nous causions…!* —exclamó su mujer, como para salir del paso—. Me imagino que se puede mencionar a un amigo, cuando se está hablando, sin tomarse tanta libertad.

—Un gato puede mirar a un rey, como dice su proverbio inglés —añadió Schinkel jocosamente.

Se rió con tantas ganas de su propia broma que se le cerraron los ojos hasta desaparecer, un efecto que Hyacinth ya había observado antes y que consideraba particularmente desfavorable para él, pues parecía acabar de rematar su perfecta fealdad. En interés de su cara, valía más que se dedicara a cultivar la inexpresión.

—¡Huy, un rey, un rey! —objetó Poupin, moviendo la cabeza—. Eso es lo que no conviene ser, *au point où nous en sommes*.

—Sólo he venido para darles las buenas noches —dijo Hyacinth—. Me temo que es demasiado tarde para visitas, aunque Schinkel no parece creerlo así.

—Siempre es demasiado tarde cuando llegas, *mon très-cher* —contestó el francés—. Ya sabes que tienes siempre un sitio en nuestro hogar.

—Lo estimo demasiado para alterarlo —dijo Hyacinth, sonriendo y mirando a los tres.

—Podemos volver a sentarnos con toda tranquilidad; somos un grupo muy bien avenido. Ponte a mi lado.

Y el francés acercó otra silla a la mesa, y la colocó al lado de la que acababa de dejar.

—Ha andado mucho y está cansado, no rechazará una copita —dijo *madame* Poupin muy decidida, mientras se dirigía hacia la bandeja en la que estaba el servicio dorado de los licores.

—Todos la aceptaríamos, *ma bonne*; es una gran ocasión para tomar una gota de *fine* —añadió su marido, mientras Hyacinth se sentaba en la silla que le había ofrecido.

Schinkel volvió a ocupar su sitio, que estaba enfrente; miraba al nuevo visitante sin hablar, pero su larga cara seguía aplanándose, como si fuera la representación de la alegría. Llevaba una chaqueta verde que Hyacinth había visto antes; era una prenda de ceremonia, y de un tipo que al chico le parecía imposible de encontrar en Londres o en la época moderna. Era eminentemente germánica y de gran antigüedad, y tenía un cuello alto y tieso que le llegaba hasta las orejas y casi le tapaba el vendaje que perpetuamente llevaba. Eustache Poupin se quedó de pie después de sentarse Hyacinth, y permaneció a su lado, poniéndole una mano sobre la cabeza. Al sentir ese contacto recordó de pronto algo que le puso el corazón en la garganta. La posibilidad que se le ocurrió, reflejada tanto en todo el comportamiento de Poupin como en la intención tranquilizadora de su caricia y en el súbito ofrecimiento de un refrigerio por parte de su mujer, explicaba la confusión de los reunidos y le recordaba a nuestro héroe la promesa que se había hecho a sí mismo de estar

a la altura y permanecer tranquilo en el momento en que cierta crisis se presentara en su destino. Tenía la sensación de que esa crisis estaba en el aire, muy cerca, tanto que podía tocarla si hacía otro movimiento: la mano del francés, que pretendía ser una atenuante, sólo había servido de aviso. Al mirar a Schinkel sintió una especie de mareo; por un momento, tuvo la sensación de que la habitación entera daba vueltas. Su resolución de permanecer tranquilo parecía demasiado fácil; ni siquiera sentía fuerzas para hablar. Sabía que iba a temblarle la voz, y por eso no contestó a las palabras almibaradas de Schinkel, pronunciadas tras de alguna vacilación:

—*También*, querido Robinson, ¿ha pasado bien el domingo, ha tenido un día feliz?

Sus ojos interrogaron a la mesa, pero sólo vio en ella una superficie muy bien limpiada, a la que los codos del francés y su mujer habían sacado brillo durante años, y las cartas sucias con que la señora hacía «solitarios» —parecía haber estado dedicada a ese entretenimiento cuando llegó Schinkel—, y que realmente daban un poco la impresión de unos jugadores sorprendidos que hubieran retirado las puestas. *Madame* Poupin, después de sumergirse en un armario, volvió con una botella de chartreuse verde, aparición que hizo exclamar al alemán:

—¡*Lieber Gott*, los franceses, los franceses, qué bien se las arreglan siempre! ¿Qué más se puede pedir en el mundo?

La señora distribuyó el licor, pero el chico no pudo tragar ni una gota, y dejó que lo apreciaran sus amigos. Su indiferencia hacia esa exquisitez suscitó discusiones y conjeturas e hizo que los otros se lanzaran teorías, contradicciones y hasta bromas sobre su cabeza, todo ello con una volubilidad que le resultaba muy poco natural. En opinión de Poupin y de Schinkel, algo iba mal para un hombre que no pudiera chascar la lengua al probarlo; tenía que estar enamorado o tener algo aún peor de qué quejarse. Era verdad que Hyacinth *andaba* siempre enamorado, eso no era ningún secreto para sus amigos; pero nunca se había visto que le quitara la sed. La francesa se burló de esa versión del caso, declarando que el efecto de tan tierna pasión era hacerle a uno disfrutar de sus provisiones —siempre que todo fuera bien, *bien entendu*—; ¿y qué oído era el que podía mostrarse sordo a las engañosas palabras de una persona tan atractiva? En prueba de lo cual, declaró que ella nunca había comido y bebido con tanto gusto como cuando guardaba (hacía ya muchos años) un rinconcito en su corazón para el pillo de su marido. Para *madame* Poupin, el calificar a su compañero de fatigas de pillo indicaba un alto grado de jovialidad. Hyacinth continuaba sentado, contemplando la mesa con la sensación de ser en cierto modo un testigo indiferente e irresponsable de la evolución de su destino. Por fin levantó la vista y dijo a sus compañeros:

—¿Qué es lo que ocurre y qué demonios les pasa a todos?

Después de esa pregunta les rogó que le dijeran qué era lo que habían estado diciendo de él, ya que admitían que había sido el tema de su conversación.

Madame Poupin respondió por todos que no habían hecho más que hablar de lo mucho que le querían, pero que iban a dejar de quererle si se volvía tan suspicaz y tan *grincheux*. Que le había echado las cartas a Schinkel para adivinar su porvenir, y que se las echaría también a él si quería. Las de Schinkel no habían dicho gran cosa, sólo que algún día iba a encontrar una cosa que había perdido, pero que probablemente volvería a perderla y que le estaba muy bien empleado. Él había objetado que nunca había tenido nada que perder y que no esperaba tenerlo; pero eso era una tontería, pues se acercaba la hora en que todo el mundo tendría algo, y era de esperar que Schinkel lo conservara cuando llegara a tenerlo. Eustache riñó a su mujer por su falta de seriedad, le recordó que al chico no le interesaban nada los trucos de las viejas, y dijo que estaba seguro de que Hyacinth había ido para hablar de otra cosa muy distinta: la cuestión —tenía la bondad de interesarse por ella, lo mismo que se interesaba por todo lo que les concernía— de los términos que *monsieur* Poupin debía establecer, porque se lo debía a sí mismo, a su dignidad, y a un justo aunque no exagerado sentimiento de su valía, para aceptar la oferta de Crook de convertirse en encargado del taller de Soho; una oferta que no se había hecho formalmente, pero que se palpaba en el aire, y que tenía que llegar —al menos eso parecía— en el plazo de uno o dos días. El viejo que ocupaba el cargo pensaba establecerse por su cuenta. El francés dio a entender que antes de aceptar esa proposición debería tener muy sólidas garantías.

—*Il me faudrait des conditions très particulières* —comentó.

A Hyacinth le sonaba muy raro, ahora que el abismo que le separaba del futuro había doblado su anchura, oír hablar a Poupin con tanta tranquilidad de grandes posibilidades. El dueño y la dueña de la casa estaban sentados a ambos lados de él, y Poupin trazó un esquema, con tintas más bien sombrías, de la situación de Soho, enumerando una serie de elementos de descomposición que veía estaban actuando, y con los que no se comprometería a tratar a menos que se le diera carta blanca. ¿Lo comprendía Schinkel y, si lo hacía, de qué se reía con aquella cara de pascuas? ¿Comprendía Schinkel que el pobre Eustache era víctima

de una alucinación y que no existía ni la más remota posibilidad de que le ofrecieran un cargo importante? Estaba menos capacitado para tratar con el obrero británico de lo que lo había estado al empezar a codearse con él, y el viejo Crook no había cometido una equivocación en su vida, al menos en el manejo de las herramientas. Las respuestas de Hyacinth eran escasas y mecánicas, y en ese momento no se molestó más en dar a entender que compartía las ideas de su amigo.

—Usted tiene noticias… usted tiene noticias sobre mí —dijo de repente a Schinkel—. No le gusta, no le gusta tener que dármelas y ha venido a hablar con nuestros amigos para ver si podían ayudarle. Pero no creo que vayan a ayudarle mucho, ¡pobrecillos! ¿Por qué se preocupa? No debía preocuparse más de lo que me preocupo yo. Ésa no es forma de hacerlo.

—*Qu'est-ce quil dit, quest-ce quil dit, le pauvre chéri?* —preguntó *madame* Poupin muy nerviosa, mientras que Schinkel miraba fijamente a su marido como para pedirle algún sabio consejo.

—Hijo mío, *vous vous faites des idées!* —exclamó el francés, que volvió a poner una mano acariciadora sobre el joven.

Pero Hyacinth empujó la silla y se levantó:

—Si tienen algo que decirme es una crueldad dejármelo ver como lo han hecho, y no aclarármelo.

—¿Por qué voy a tener algo que decirle? —preguntó Schinkel, casi con un gemido.

—No lo sé, pero creo que lo tiene. Yo comprendo las cosas, las adivino en seguida. Ése es siempre mi modo de ser, y ahora lo es mucho más que nunca.

—Lo hace realmente; es maravilloso —concedió Schinkel tímidamente.

—Señor Schinkel, ¿quiere hacerme el favor de marcharse, adonde sea, pero fuera de esta casa? —preguntó *madame* Poupin en francés.

—Sí, eso sería lo mejor, y yo me iré con usted —dijo Hyacinth.

—Creo que si te retirases, hijo mío, nos harías un gran favor —intervino Poupin, como si disculpara su mal humor—. ¿No vas a hacernos justicia creyendo que puedes dejar tus asuntos en nuestras manos?

Hyacinth discutía con toda seriedad; estaba ya convencido de que Schinkel tenía algún mensaje para él, y la curiosidad por saber de qué se trataba le resultaba insoportable:

—Estoy sorprendido ante su debilidad —le dijo a Poupin con la mayor severidad posible.

El francés le miró, y luego se agarró a su cuello:

—Eres sublime, amigo mío, eres verdaderamente sublime.

—¿Quiere tener la bondad de decirme qué piensa hacer con ese chico? —preguntó *madame* Poupin, sin apartar los ojos de Schinkel.

—No tiene nada que ver con usted, señora —contestó Hyacinth, al tiempo que se separaba de Poupin—. Schinkel, me gustaría que se viniera usted conmigo.

—*Calmons-nous, entendons-nous, expliquons-nous*. La situación es muy sencilla —continuó Poupin.

—Iré con usted si eso le complace —dijo Schinkel con mucha amabilidad.

—Entonces tendrá que darme primero la carta, la sellada —dijo *madame* Poupin, erguida, y dirigiéndose a Schinkel.

—¡Esposa mía, eres *bien sotte*! —rugió Poupin, que levantó las manos, se encogió de hombros y dio media vuelta.

—Puedo ser lo que se te antoje, pero no voy a tomar parte en esto, no, ¡no lo quiera Dios, no voy a hacerlo! —declaró la buena mujer, que se puso delante de Schinkel para impedir que se marchara.

—Si tiene una carta para mí debiera dármela, ¡maldita sea! —dijo Hyacinth a Schinkel—. No tiene derecho a dársela a nadie más.

—Se la llevaré a su casa —contestó Schinkel con un guiño vano, que parecía indicar cómo había que tratar a *madame* Poupin.

—¡Ah, a su casa… soy yo la que irá a su casa! —gritó la señora—. Te miro, te he mirado siempre como si fueras mi hijo —añadió dirigiéndose a Hyacinth—, y si ésta no es ocasión para una madre…

—Es usted quien está convirtiéndola en una ocasión. Yo no sé de qué habla —dijo Hyacinth.

Había estado consultando la cara de Schinkel, y creía ver en ella una súplica extraña y convulsa, pero sincera, de que confiase en él.

—Los he trastornado, y creo que lo mejor que puedo hacer es marcharme.

Poupin había vuelto a acercarse; tomó al joven por el brazo, como para impedir que se marchara antes de comprender que estaba equivocado:

—¿Cómo es posible que te importe cuando sabes que todo ha cambiado?

—¿Qué quiere decir con que todo ha cambiado?

—Tus opiniones, tus simpatías, tu actitud. Yo no lo apruebo, *je le constate*. Le has retirado tu confianza al

pueblo; has dicho cosas, en ese mismo sitio en que estás ahora, que nos han causado mucha pena a mi mujer y a mí.

—Si no te quisiéramos, diríamos que nos has traicionado de la forma más insensata —corroboró en seguida la mujer.

—No los traicionaré nunca de una forma insensata —sonrió Hyacinth con cierta desgana.

—No vas a entregarnos, eso es lo que quieres decir. Pero no tienes derecho a hacer algo por el pueblo cuando has dejado de creer en el pueblo. *Il feut être conséquent, nom de Dieu!* —añadió Poupin.

—Tienes que abandonar toda idea de actuar por mí, *je ne permets pas ça!* —intervino su mujer, grandilocuente.

—La cosa probablemente no tiene importancia… unas palabras nada más —sugirió Schinkel para suavizar la situación.

—Te repudiamos, te negamos, te denunciamos —gritó Poupin con soberbio acaloramiento.

—Amigos míos, son ustedes los que han perdido la cabeza, no yo —dijo Hyacinth—. Les agradezco mucho su solicitud, pero la inconsecuencia es suya. En cualquier caso, buenas noches.

Se había separado de ellos y estaba a punto de salir de la habitación cuando *madame* Poupin se abalanzó sobre él, lo mismo que había hecho su marido un momento antes, sólo que en silencio y con gran apasionamiento y congoja. Dado que era una mujer fuerte y robusta, se apoderó de él y le apretó contra su generoso pecho, en un abrazo largo y mudo.

—No sé qué quieren que haga —dijo en cuanto pudo hablar—, lis a mí a quien corresponde juzgar mis convicciones.

—No queremos que hagas nada, porque *sabemos* que has cambiado —insistió Poupin—. ¿No es algo que salta a la vista en cuanto miras o abres la boca? Es sólo por eso, porque eso lo cambia todo.

—¿Cambia acaso mi juramento? Hay cosas en las que uno no puede cambiar. Yo no prometí creer: prometí obedecer.

—Queremos que seas sincero eso es lo que importa —comentó Poupin, edificante—. Yo iré a verlos, haré que lo comprendan.

—¡Eso tenías que haberlo hecho antes! —exclamó su mujer.

—No sé de quién están hablando, pero no permito que nadie se entrometa en mis asuntos. —Hyacinth hablaba con vehemencia; la escena resultaba cruel para sus nervios, que no estaban en condiciones de soportarla.

—Cuando se trata de alguna cosa de Hoffendahl es mejor no entrometerse —comentó Schinkel muy serio.

—Y dígame usted, ¿quién es Hoffendahl y de dónde le viene la autoridad? —preguntó *madame* Poupin, que había comprendido el comentario—. ¿Quién le ha puesto por encima de todos nosotros y a ver si no vamos a tener que hacer otra cosa que arrastrarnos delante de él? Que se ocupe en sus asuntos y no se los cargue a muchachos inocentes, estén o no estén a favor o en contra de nosotros.

La protesta había ido tan lejos que Poupin se creyó obligado a recobrar la dignidad:

—No tiene más autoridad que la que nosotros le damos, pero sabes muy bien cómo le respetamos y también que es uno de los puros, *ma bonne*. Hyacinth puede hacer lo que quiera, eso lo sabe tan bien como yo. Sabe que no se le va a forzar ni con una pluma; sabe que, por mi parte, hace mucho que dejé de esperar nada de él.

—Desde luego no se le va a forzar —dijo Schinkel—. Es una cosa que se toma o se deja. Sólo que *ellos* llevan los libros.

Hyacinth estaba allí frente a los tres, con los ojos fijos en el suelo:

—Claro que puedo hacer lo que quiera, y lo que quiero es lo que haré. Aparte de eso, ¿de qué estamos hablando con tanta excitación? No tengo avisos, no tengo señal ni orden alguna. Cuando reciba la llamada tendremos tiempo de discutir. Que llegue o que no llegue, es asunto mío.

—*Ganz gewiss*, no es asunto suyo —dijo Schinkel.

—No puedo comprender por qué el señor Paul no ha hecho nada durante todo este tiempo, sabiendo que ahora todo es distinto —comentó *madame* Poupin.

—Sí, hijo mío, no comprendo a nuestro amigo —añadió su marido, mirando a Hyacinth con desconfianza.

—No es asunto suyo ni tampoco nuestro, no es asunto de nadie —opinó nervioso Schinkel.

—Muniment va derecho; lo mejor que pueden hacer es imitarle —dijo Hyacinth, tratando de rodear a Poupin, que se había colocado delante de la puerta.

—Prométeme sólo una cosa: no hacer nada antes de haberme visto a mí —le rogó el francés.

—Pobre amigo mío, es usted un hombre muy débil.

Y Hyacinth, a pesar de su oposición, salió.

—¡Muy bien, si estás con nosotros es todo lo que deseaba yo saber! —le oyó gritar desde lo alto de la escalera, con una voz muy distinta, un tono de súbita y extravagante fortaleza.

XLIV

Hyacinth había bajado la escalera corriendo y había salido de la casa, pero no tenía la menor intención de perder de vista a Schinkel. El extraño comportamiento de los Poupin constituía una sorpresa y un fastidio, y estaba deseando verse libre de ellos. Se asombraba con la mayor candidez de la alarma que habían sufrido por causa de él, ya que había creído siempre que el compromiso que había firmado con Hoffendahl no iba a dejar de presentarse. ¿Qué había dicho, qué había hecho, después de todo, que pudiera darles derecho a acusarle de apostasía? Siempre había tenido libertad para criticarlo todo, y era natural que en algunas ocasiones hubiera hablado con esa misma libertad en el saloncito de Lisson Grove; pero sólo con la princesa se había permitido burlarse de sus mugrientos «inferiores» y dar toda la medida del escepticismo que sentía. Le habría parecido una falta de delicadeza mostrar desprecio por las opiniones de sus viejos amigos extranjeros, a quienes le unían una serie de recuerdos que los hacían venerables, además de que, para Hyacinth, un cambio de ideas era más bien ocasión para evitar toda publicidad y guardar una reserva retrospectiva: no podía llevarle a uno a la agresión o al júbilo. Cuando se acababa de descubrir lo que podía decirse desde el lado contrario, uno no tenía ganas de jactarse de su agudeza, ni siquiera en el caso de que las nuevas convicciones arrojaran sombras que pudieran parecer fantasmas del pasado.

Anduvo dando vueltas por la calle a cierta distancia de la casa, vigilando la salida de Schinkel y dispuesto a esperar hasta el amanecer si fuera necesario. Le había dicho al nervioso trío que la forma en que le llegara la comunicación que miraban con tanto recelo no era en modo alguno asunto suyo, podía llegarle por las buenas o por las malas. Eso no dejaba de ser verdad en teoría, pero en realidad tenía un tremendo deseo de saber qué había querido decir *madame* Poupin al aludir a una carta sellada, que iba destinada a él y estaba en posesión de Schinkel, alusión que el propio Schinkel había confirmado al reconocerlo virtualmente. En realidad era esa misma impaciencia la que le había hecho salir de la casa, porque tenía motivos para creer que el alemán no le fallaría, y le irritaba ver que los atolondrados Poupin trataban de interponerse y hacer que la misiva no siguiera su curso. Esperó y esperó, con la confianza de que Schinkel estaría tratando con ellos con su estilo germánico, categórico y lento, y sólo le reprochaba no haber confiado en él desde el principio. ¿Por qué no había acudido directamente a él —fuera el que fuera el misterioso documento— en lugar de ir a hablar con aquellos franceses cabezas de chorlito? Eran muy pocas las personas que pasaban a esa hora por Lisson Grove, y casi todas las luces estaban ya apagadas; no había nada que mirar como no fueran las casas bajas y negras, la débil luz de las farolas espaciadas, los gatos que salían de caza y cruzaban como flechas la calle, y las lejanas y misteriosas estrellas, que le daban más que nunca la impresión de contemplar nuestro desamparo y no dar síntomas de prestar ayuda alguna. Resonaron los pasos de un policía al otro lado de la calle, que se le quedó mirando al pasar, y se detuvo unos minutos en la esquina como si no quisiera perderle de vista. Hyacinth tuvo ocasión de pensar que quizá no estuviera lejos el día en que un policía no iba a quitarle los ojos de encima y con muy fundados motivos, y que podría pasear arriba y abajo, y pasar y repasar por delante mientras montaba la guardia.

Le pareció que Schinkel tardaba muchísimo en salir de la casa, pero probablemente no había pasado más de media hora. En el silencio de la calle oyó la voz de Poupin que acompañaba a Schinkel, y se refugió en el quicio de una puerta del mismo lado, de forma que el francés no pudiera ver que estaba esperando. Tuvo que aguardar allí bastante tiempo, porque los dos se quedaron hablando en el umbral de la puerta, sin que Hyacinth alcanzara a entender lo que decían. Poupin por fin volvió a entrar, y Schinkel echó a andar calle abajo hacia donde estaba Hyacinth, que ya suponía iba a tomar esa dirección, por ser el camino de su casa. Después de cerciorarse de que Poupin había entrado, el alemán se paró y miró a un lado y a otro. Indudablemente creía que Hyacinth estaba esperándole. El joven salió del escondrijo en que se había metido, fue derecho hacia él y los dos hombres se encontraron cara a cara en la calle oscura, sórdida y desierta.

—No les habrá dejado que se queden con la carta.

—No, no, la tengo —contestó Schinkel, con unos ojos que parecían más que nunca dos puntitos invisibles.

—¿Y no sería mejor que me la diera?

—Ya hablaremos de eso, ya hablaremos.

Schinkel no daba muestras de querer complacerle; tenía las manos en los bolsillos del pantalón, y un aire desesperante de suponer que disponían de una noche entera. Para ser uno de los «peligrosos» tenía una afición inaguantable al orden.

—¿Para qué tenemos que hablar? ¿No ha hablado ya bastante con esa gente toda la tarde? ¿Qué es lo que tienen ellos que decir? ¿Qué derecho tiene usted a retener una carta que me pertenece a mí?

—*Erlauben Sie*: voy a encender la pipa —contestó el alemán simplemente.

Y se dedicó a hacerlo de una forma metódica, mientras la cara pálida y agitada de Hyacinth quedaba iluminada por la cerilla que ardía sobre la barandilla herrumbrosa que tenían junto a ellos.

—Hasta que no se la haya dado no es suya —dijo Schinkel echando a andar de nuevo—. Tenga paciencia y se lo contaré —añadió, cogiendo del brazo a su compañero—. Éste es el camino de su casa, ¿no? Vamos bajando hacia el parque.

Hyacinth intentaba mostrarse paciente, y escuchó con interés cuando Schinkel comentó:

—Ella trató de cogerla; me atacó con sus propias manos. Pero yo no había ido allí para dársela.

—¿Está loca? No puedo reconocerlos —Hyacinth hablaba como si estuviera escandalizado.

—No, pero le quieren.

—Entonces, ¿por qué tratan de difamarme?

—No les parece que sea difamación si ha cambiado.

—Eso por parte de ella está muy bien; pero es penoso tener que pensarlo de él, y debo declarar que me sorprende.

—Bueno, él acudió…, me ayudó a resistir. Le dio un empujón a su mujer. Fue una primera impresión —dijo Schinkel.

—Pero no debía haberlos impresionado, amigo mío —comentó Hyacinth.

—Yo también estaba impresionado, no podía evitarlo.

—¡Caramba, qué impresionables son todos! —Hyacinth cada vez se sentía más seguro de la superioridad que todavía era capaz de mostrar.

—Lo toma muy bien. Yo lo siento mucho. Pero es una buena oportunidad —dijo Schinkel, mientras seguía fumando.

Parecía que de momento estaba absorto en su pipa; Hyacinth esperó en silencio y dijo:

—Tenga la bondad de recordar que yo entretanto sigo sin entender ni una palabra de todo lo que dice.

—Bueno, pues fue hoy, a primera hora de la mañana —comenzó el alemán—. Ya sabe que en mi país no nos levantamos tarde, y lo que hacen en mi país trato de hacerlo en todas partes. Creo que eso es muy bueno. En invierno, por supuesto, me levanto mucho antes de salir el sol, y en verano lo hago casi al mismo tiempo. Podría ver lo bonita que es la salida del sol, si uno *pudiera* ver en Londres. Los domingos, lo primero que hago es fumarme una pipa en la ventana, que está en la parte de delante, ya sabe, y da a una calle pequeña y sucia. A esa hora no hay nada que ver allí; ustedes, los ingleses, tardan mucho en salir de la cama. No es que haya mucho que ver a ninguna hora; la callejuela en que vivo es poco importante. Pero esa primera pipa es la que más disfruto. No pido nada más cuando puedo darme ese gusto. Miro la luz nueva y clara —aunque en Londres no es demasiado clara—, y pienso que es el principio de un día más. Me pregunto qué traerá ese día, si nos traerá algo bueno a los pobres diablos que somos nosotros. Pero son ya muchos los que he visto pasar, y no han traído nada. Esta mañana, *doch*, sí que trajo algo, algo al menos para usted. Al otro lado de la calle vi que había un chico parado justo enfrente de mi casa y mirando a mi ventana. Me miraba directamente, sin ninguna ceremonia, y yo seguía fumando mi pipa y mirándole también. Me preguntaba qué querría, pero no hizo ninguna señal ni habló una palabra. Era un chico muy bien arreglado; tenía gafas y llevaba un paraguas. Yo creo que estuvimos así, mirándonos cara a cara, casi durante un cuarto de hora, hasta que por fin sacó un reloj —tenía reloj también—, y se quedó con él en la mano, mirándolo cada cinco minutos, como para darme a entender que no iba a dedicarme el día entero. Entonces fue cuando se me ocurrió que deseaba hablarme. Usted lo habría adivinado antes, pero nosotros, los alemanes, somos lentos. Eso sí, cuando entendemos, actuamos; por eso le hice una seña con la cabeza para decirle que iba a bajar. Me puse la chaqueta y los zapatos, porque sólo llevaba la camisa y los calcetines —bueno y los pantalones, claro— y bajé a la calle. Al verme llegar se fue acercando despacio, pero un poco más allá me esperó. Al acercarme a él vi que realmente era un chico muy bien arreglado, muy

joven y con una cara muy agradable. Llevaba guantes, y su paraguas era de seda. Me gustó mucho. Dijo que tenía que dar la vuelta a la esquina, así que los dos dimos la vuelta. Yo creía que habría allí alguien esperándonos; pero no había nada, sólo las tiendas cerradas, y la luz de la mañana, y una neblina primaveral que anunciaba haría buen día. Yo no sabía lo que quería; quizá fuera algo relacionado con nuestros asuntos —eso fue lo primero que pensé— o quizá no fuera más que un juego. Por eso tuve mucho cuidado; no le dije que entrara en la casa. Lo que sí le dije fue que me perdonara por no haber entendido antes que quería hablar conmigo; y al decirle eso, contestó que no tenía importancia, que habría esperado todo el día para verme. Yo le dije que me alegraba de que no hubiera sido así, y tuvimos una conversación muy cortés. *Era* un chico muy agradable. Pero lo único que quería era entregarme una carta en la mano; como él dijo, sólo era un buen cartero privado. Me dio la carta, que no llevaba dilección y, después de haberla cogido, le pregunté cómo lo sabía y si no sería una pena que resultase que no era yo el hombre a quien iba destinada. Pero no se asustó lo más mínimo; me dijo que sabía todo lo que necesitaba saber, que sabía todo lo que tenía que hacer y cómo hacerlo. Creo que es un elemento muy valioso. Le pregunté si la carta requería una respuesta, y me dijo que no tenía nada que ver con eso; lo único que él tenía que hacer era entregármela. Me recomendó que esperase a estar de nuevo en casa para leerla. Hablamos un poco más, siempre con mucha cortesía, y comentó que había venido tan temprano porque temía que me marchara si venía más tarde, y también porque tenía mucho que hacer, y necesitaba aprovechar los momentos libres. La verdad es que daba la impresión de tener mucho que hacer, de tener una colocación muy buena. Debo decirle que me habló durante todo el tiempo en inglés, pero no era inglés; pronunciaba las palabras como si las hubiera aprendido muy bien. Todo lo había aprendido muy bien. Supongo que no es alemán; en ese caso me habría hablado en alemán. Pero ¡hay tantos de todos los países! Yo le dije que si tenía tanto que hacer no iba a entretenerle; que me iría a mi habitación y abriría la carta. Dijo que no tenía importancia; y entonces le pregunté si no quería venir a mi habitación para descansar. Le dije que no era muy bonita, porque él daba la impresión de ser un chico que tenía una casa muy buena. Luego comprendí que lo que quería decir era que no hacía falta que siguiéramos hablando, y se marchó sin darme siquiera la mano. No sé si llevaría más cartas que entregar, pero se marchó como un buen cartero que está de servicio, y sin darme ninguna información más.

Schinkel necesitó mucho tiempo para contar esta historia, su minuciosidad calmosa y concienzuda no hacía concesiones a la impaciencia y curiosidad que pudiera sentir el que le escuchaba. Iba paso a paso, tratando cada uno de los puntos con claridad, como si todos ellos tuvieran el mismo interés para su acompañante. Hyacinth no intentó darle prisa, y realmente le escuchó con toda paciencia; porque estaba de verdad interesado, y además veía cada vez con más claridad que podía estar seguro de Schinkel, que le daría plena satisfacción cuando llegara el momento, y no iba a marearle poniendo condiciones, a pesar de la equivocación, después de todo muy disculpable, que había cometido al ir a discutir el asunto a Lisson Grove. Llegado el momento, Hyacinth supo que al volver a su casa y abrir el paquetito que le habían entregado, el señor Schinkel se había encontrado ante dos cosas distintas: una carta sellada dirigida al chico, y una hoja de papel en la que en tres líneas se le comunicaba que pasados dos días después de recibirlo, debía entregar la carta al «joven Robinson». Las tres líneas en cuestión iban firmadas con las iniciales D. H., y la carta estaba escrita de propia mano. Schinkel decía que conocía la letra; era la buena letra —buena hasta en sus menores detalles— de Diedrich Hoffendahl.

—Bien, bien —dijo apoyándose en su brazo como para tranquilizarle—. Le acompañaré hasta la puerta de su casa y se la daré allí. A menos que prefiera que me quede con ella hasta mañana por la mañana, para que pueda dormir tranquilo, quiero decir en el caso de que contenga algo desagradable para usted. Pero probablemente no es nada; probablemente es sólo para decirle que no necesita pensar más en su encargo.

—¿Por qué eso?

—Porque probablemente habrán oído que usted se ha enfriado.

—¿Que me he enfriado? —Hyacinth le hizo detenerse; acababan de llegar a la parte alta de Park Lane—. ¿A quién le he dado yo motivo para decir eso?

—¡Ah, bueno!, si no lo ha hecho, tanto mejor. Entonces puede que sea por otra razón.

—No sea idiota, Schinkel —dijo Hyacinth mientras echaban otra vez a andar—. ¿Por qué demonios fue entonces a chismorrear con los Poupin?

—Porque pensé que les gustaría saberlo. Aparte de eso, me sentía responsable; creí que lo haría mejor si lo sabían. Y además yo soy como ellos… le quiero.

Hyacinth no dijo nada ante esa confesión, pero pasado un momento preguntó:

—¿Por qué el chico no me entregó la carta directamente a mí?

¡Ah, no se lo pregunté! La razón probablemente no era nada complicada sino muy sencilla: que los que

la escribieron sabían mi dirección pero no sabían la suya. Además, ¿no era yo uno de los que le respaldaban?

—Sí, pero no el más importante. El más importante era Paul Muniment. ¿Por qué no se me ha comunicado nada a través de Paul Muniment? —Y al hacer esa pregunta le pareció que resultaba cada vez más chocante cuanto más se pensara.

—Querido Robinson, usted quiere saber demasiadas cosas. Puede estar seguro de que siempre habrá buenas razones. Yo hubiera preferido, sí, hubiera preferido que fuera Muniment. ¡Pero si no se la mandaron a él…! —la lucidez de Schinkel terminó ahí, y se perdió en una nube de humo.

—Bueno, ¿si no se la enviaron a él…? —insistió Hyacinth.

—Es usted muy amigo suyo, ¿qué quiere que le diga?

Hyacinth le miró con cierta desconfianza, y vio una expresión ambigua y evasiva en los dulces ojillos de su amigo:

—Si hay algo en contra suya, el hecho de ser su amigo hace que sea precisamente yo quien tenga que oírlo. Puedo defenderle.

—Bueno, cabe la posibilidad de que no estén satisfechos.

—¿Qué quiere decir con que no estén satisfechos?

—Qué quiere que le diga, que no confíen en él.

—¿No confían en él? Y en cambio confían en mí.

—Muchacho, puede estar seguro de que hay buenas razones —contestó Schinkel. Luego añadió—: lo saben todo, todo. Son como el Dios de los creyentes: saben ver en los corazones; y no sólo en los corazones, conocen todo lo que hay en la vida de un hombre: sus días, sus noches, las palabras que dice y las que se calla. ¡Van derechos y llegan muy adentro!

Los dos continuaron su camino e hicieron la mayor parte de él en silencio. Hyacinth estaba muy intrigado con unas palabras que se le habían escapado a su amigo al preguntarle él qué había dicho Poupin al enterarse aquella tarde del motivo de su visita. *Il vaut du galme… il vaut du galme*: ésa era la versión que daba el alemán de las palabras del francés; y Hyacinth se las repetía una y otra vez, y casi con la misma pronunciación. Tenían cierto efecto calmante. En realidad, el bueno de Schinkel resultaba de algún modo saludable, según pensaba Hyacinth cuando por fin llegaron a la puerta de su casa, en Westminster, y se quedaron allí, cara a cara, mientras el joven esperaba, seguía esperando. Gran parte de su impaciencia había desaparecido, y contemplaba sin perder la calma la forma amorosa en que su colega sacudía la ceniza de la pipa que se había fumado —que se había fumado con tanta vehemencia— y la metía a descansar en su sepulcro. Fue una vez terminada esa operación, hecha con tanto cuidado como siempre, cuando dijo:

—*También*, y ahora la carta —y, metiendo la mano en su viejo chaleco, sacó la misteriosa misiva.

Pasó en seguida a manos de Hyacinth, que se la metió en el bolsillo sin mirarla. Le pareció ver cierto desencanto en la cara fea y bondadosa de Schinkel ante esa indicación de que tampoco él, a pesar de tenerla tan a mano, iba a enterarse de su contenido; pero prefirió que fuera así antes que tener que volver a atribuirle, tontamente, un sentido tranquilizador. Schinkel tuvo la picardía o el buen gusto de no volver a intentarlo, mientras que Hyacinth, al sentir la presión de la carta sobre su corazón, veía cada vez con más claridad que aquello no era ningún bálsamo para sus preocupaciones, sino un cuchillo que se le clavaba sin remedio. Pasado un momento, su amigo dijo:

—Ahora que ya la tiene, estoy contento. Me resulta más fácil —y el alemán intentó una mueca triste y forzada.

—¡Ya me lo imagino! —exclamó Hyacinth—. Si no hubiera hecho su trabajo tendría que pagarlo.

Schinkel masculló unas palabras como para ponerse a tono, y luego, mientras se volvía de espaldas para meter la llave en la cerradura, añadió:

—Y si usted no hace el suyo le va a pasar lo mismo.

—Sí, como dice usted, van derechos. Buenas noches.

El pasillo y la escalera no tenían nunca luz, y los inquilinos o bien se abrían camino a tientas, con la seguridad infalible que da la práctica, o encendían una cerilla en la pared, la cual, en la penumbra más amable del día, producía un efecto lacerante. La habitación de Hyacinth estaba en la parte de atrás del segundo piso y, al acercarse a ella, se asustó al ver que salía un poco de luz por la rendija de la parte baja de la puerta, que no encajaba bien, y que acabó de darle una impresión de miseria. Se paró a considerar aquel nuevo aviso de su crisis, pues su primer impulso fue relacionarlo con lo que le había dicho Schinkel, ¿qué podía ser ya todo lo que tuviera que ver con él sino una parte del mismo asunto? Era lo más natural del mundo que le esperara allí una nueva maravilla. Por otra parte, se le ocurrió pensar que al marcharse para ir a ver a *lady* Aurora después del té podía haberse dejado un cabo de vela encendido, y que eso

demostraba lo fresca que era su patrona, tan tacaña para sí, pero incapaz de entrar a apagarla. Luego pensó que podía haber tenido alguna visita durante su ausencia, y que el visitante había tomado posesión de su apartamento mientras volvía, y había acudido a los pocos recursos que ofrecía. Al abrir la puerta, comprobó que esa última suposición era la acertada, aunque la persona que estaba allí no era ninguna de las presencias amenazadoras que había imaginado. Mister Vetch estaba sentado junto a la mesita en la que escribía Hyacinth; parecía cansado, con los ojos cerrados y la cabeza apoyada en la mano. Pero levantó la vista al aparecer el joven.

—No te he oído entrar; eres muy silencioso.

—Cuando vuelvo tarde entro sin hacer ruido, por los inquilinos; aunque estoy por decir que soy el único huésped que se toma esa molestia. Aparte de eso, me parece que estaba dormido.

—No, no estaba dormido —contestó el viejo—. No duermo mucho ahora.

—Entonces estaba sumido en hondas meditaciones.

—Sí, he estado pensando.

Luego le dijo que la patrona se había negado a dejarle entrar antes de dar toda clase de seguridades sobre sus buenas intenciones, y de explicar que era el más viejo amigo que el señor Robinson tenía en el mundo. Llevaba una hora allí; había pensado que podría encontrarle si iba tarde.

El señor Robinson dijo que se alegraba mucho de que le hubiera esperado, que estaba muy contento de verle, y que sólo sentía no haber sabido antes que iría para tener algo que ofrecerle. Se sentó en la cama, vagamente expectante, no comprendía qué era lo que le había llevado al violinista tan lejos y a una hora tan fuera de lo normal. Pero no hizo más que decir la verdad al decir que se alegraba de verle. Hyacinth había subido con tanta angustia y tal deseo de encontrarse a solas con la revelación que llevaba en el bolsillo que la presencia de su visitante le proporcionó un verdadero alivio al obligarle a retrasar la soledad. El sitio en que había colocado la carta parecía latirle en el costado, pero le agradecía a su viejo amigo el forzarle a seguir así.

—He estado mirando tus libros —dijo el violinista—; tienes tres o cuatro ejemplares que son una maravilla. Reconozco tu mano en cuanto la veo; tiene siempre algunos toques más delicados que los de los demás. Yo diría que es el estilo de un maestro. Con un gusto tan bueno, y con unas manos así, tu futuro está asegurado. Puedes ganar una fortuna y hacerte famoso.

Mister Vetch se inclinó como para bosquejar esa visión del futuro, tenía las manos apoyadas en las rodillas y miraba al chico como desafiándole a discutir una afirmación tan alentadora y sobre todo tan de fiar. Pero el efecto que produjo en Hyacinth lo que veía en su cara fue hacerle pensar que el violinista sabía algo aunque no pudiera adivinar cómo había llegado a saberlo. Los Poupin, por ejemplo, no habían tenido tiempo de comunicarse con él, aun suponiendo que fueran capaces de semejante bajeza, cosa que para Hyacinth resultaba inconcebible, a pesar de que una hora antes los había visto quedar muy por debajo de lo que esperaba de ellos. Ante esa sospecha, le invadió un tremendo deseo de fingir sin reparos: se imaginaba lo que quería el viejo, pero no pensaba darle ninguna satisfacción, todo lo más la satisfacción de hacerle creer que sus sospechas eran una pura idiotez. Hyacinth echó una ojeada a los libros que había sacado del estante, y admitió que era un trabajo que valía la pena, y que tener la habilidad necesaria para hacer tales cosas, mientras uno no se quedara ciego o tullido, podía considerarse un recurso muy seguro. Luego, de repente, al seguir mirándose el uno al otro, la presión que ejercía la curiosidad del viejo, la expresión inquisitiva y suplicante de sus ojos, que en los últimos tiempos habían cambiado completamente, llegaron a hacérsele tan insoportables que el joven adoptó una actitud agresiva y le preguntó sin rodeos si había hecho una peregrinación nocturna sólo por contemplar su trabajo, después de haber tenido siempre a su disposición media docena de ejemplares en Lomax Place.

—Querido amigo, usted tiene algo metido en la cabeza, algún fantástico temor, una *idée fixe* completamente equivocada. ¿Por qué le ha dado esta noche más fuerte que nunca? Sea lo que sea, eso ha sido lo que le ha traído aquí, a una hora tan poco normal y bajo un impulso que no puede o no quiere decir. Por supuesto, tendría que estar agradecido a todo lo que le traiga aquí, y lo estoy, porque siempre me agrada verle; pero lo que ya no puede gustarme es ver que le hace a usted desgraciado. Parece una madre nerviosa que tiene al niño acostado en el piso de arriba y sube y baja cada cinco minutos para ver si está bien, si no se ha destapado o se ha caído de la cama. No se preocupe, querido mister Vetch, no se preocupe, estoy muy bien tapado y todavía no me he caído de la cama.

Se oyó decir esas palabras como si estuviera escuchando a otra persona; la frescura que denotaban le sonaba rara en unas circunstancias tan crueles. Pero se creía al borde de emprender una acción en la que la frescura había de desempeñar una parte considerable, y le parecía que podía ir preparándose sin esperar más. La forma en que vigilaba el viejo podía indicar que él también se daba cuenta de toda su maldad, que

creía que mentía, al estar allí sentado diciendo que no pasaba nada, mientras tenía un flamante encargo revolucionario echando chispas en el bolsillo. Pero, pasado un momento, mister Vetch dijo con toda dulzura y como si realmente se hubiera tranquilizado:

—Es asombroso cómo puedes leer mis pensamientos. No confío en ti, y creo que hay unas posibilidades aterradoras. En cualquier caso, no es verdad que venga a verte cada cinco minutos. No sabes la cantidad de veces que he tenido que resistirme a mis miedos, lo que he tenido que forzarme para dejarte en paz.

—Sería mejor que me dejara ir a vivir con usted, como le propuse hacerlo después de la muerte de Pinnie. Así me tendría siempre delante de los ojos —sonrió Hyacinth.

El viejo saltó de su asiento al oírlo y, como Hyacinth también se había levantado, le puso las manos en los hombros y le abrazó:

—¿Querrías hacerlo, hijo mío? ¿Te vendrías esta noche?

—¿Esta noche, mister Vetch?

—Esta noche me he puesto más nervioso que nunca. No sé por qué. Después de tomar el té me fumé una pipa y me tomé un trago, pero no podía parar. Me sentía muy mal, muy mal. Me dio por acordarme de Pinnie… parecía que estuviera en el cuarto. Tenía la sensación de que podía extender la mano y tocarla. Si creyera en fantasmas, en señales o mensajes de los muertos, creería que la había visto. Y no estaba allí porque sí; estaba para añadir sus temores a los míos y para hablarme de ti. Intenté hacerla callar pero fue inútil, acabó por echarme de casa. A eso de las diez cogí el sombrero y el bastón y me vine para acá. Puedes imaginarte si me parecería importante que… alquilé un coche.

—¿Y por qué se gasta el dinero de una manera tan tonta? —preguntó Hyacinth en tono cariñoso.

—¿Te vendrás esta noche? —respondió su compañero sin dejar de agarrarle.

—Yo creo que sería más sencillo que se quedara usted aquí. Veo que se encuentra mal y que está muy nervioso. Puede dormir en la rama y yo pasaré la noche en la silla.

El violinista lo pensó un momento:

—No; me vas a tener odio si te obligo a hacer una cosa tan molesta; y eso es precisamente lo que no quiero que hagas.

—Las cosas no van a cambiar porque vayamos a su cuarto. Tanto allí como aquí voy a tener que dormir en una silla.

—Tomaré otra habitación. Así podremos estar juntos —dijo el violinista.

—¿Que va a coger otra habitación a estas horas de la noche, en una casa que está llena hasta los topes y con toda la gente durmiendo? ¡Por Dios, Anastasio, usted está muy mal! Ha perdido la cabeza —dijo Hyacinth en tono jocoso.

—Bueno, pues la cogeremos mañana. Me cambiaré a otra casa que tenga dos habitaciones que estén juntas.

Era evidente que el tono del joven le calmaba.

—*Comme vous y allez!* —exclamó Hyacinth—. Permítame recordarle que en caso de dejar este sitio tengo que avisar con quince días de antelación.

—¡Huy, ya empiezas a echarte atrás! —dijo mister Vetch retirando sus manos.

—Pinnie no habría dicho eso. Si actúa y habla por mandato de su espíritu puro, haría mejor en actuar y hablar como lo habría hecho ella. Ella me habría creído.

—¿Creerte? ¿Creer qué? ¿Qué es lo que hay que creer? Si me hicieras una promesa, me lo creería.

—Le prometeré lo que quiera —dijo Hyacinth.

—Cualquier promesa que te pida, no es lo que yo quiero. Lo único que quiero es una pequeña prueba muy particular, y para eso es para lo que he venido aquí esta noche. De repente se me ocurrió que había sido un burro al no pedírtela antes. Dámela ahora y me volveré a casa tan tranquilo, y te dejaré en paz.

Hyacinth, que ya había asentido, volvió a rogarle que formulara su petición, y entonces mister Vetch dijo:

—Bueno, prométeme una cosa (por tu honor, y como del hombre que eres, Dios te ayude, al hombre que soy yo): de que nunca, bajo ninguna circunstancia, vas a «hacer» nada.

—¿«Hacer» nada?

—Nada de lo que esa gente espera de ti.

—¿Esa gente? —repitió Hyacinth.

—Mira, no me atormentes, con lo nervioso que estoy ya pretendiendo que no me entiendes —gimió el viejo—. Ya sabes a quién me refiero. No puedo dar sus nombres porque no los sé. Pero tú sí lo sabes, y ellos saben quién eres tú.

Hyacinth no tenía el menor deseo de atormentarle, pero se daba cuenta de que darle a entender que le

comprendía iba a ser lo mismo que traicionarse:

—Me imagino que sé a quién se refiere —dijo—, pero me temo que no acabo de entender para qué hace falta tanta solemnidad.

—¿No necesitan echar mano de ti?

—Ya veo lo que quiere decir. Cree que me necesitan para volarles un tren. Bueno, pues si es eso lo que le quita el sueño puede dormir tranquilo. No pienso hacerles nunca ningún trabajo.

La cara del violinista se puso radiante; parecía asombrado ante semejante milagro:

—¿Me lo juras? ¿No vas a hacer nunca nada, nada, nada?

—Nada de nada.

—¿Quieres jurármelo por la memoria de esa buena mujer de quien hemos estado hablando y a la que los dos queríamos tanto?

—¿Por la memoria de mi pobre Pinnie? Claro que sí.

Mister Vetch se derrumbó en la silla y se tapó la cara con las manos; un momento después Hyacinth vio que estaba sollozando, y diez minutos más tarde estaba dispuesto a despedirse y Hyacinth le acompañó para buscarle otro coche. Encontraron un viejo coche de cuatro ruedas, que estaba parado en un cruce y antes de meterse en él el violinista pidió al chico que le diera un beso. Hyacinth se lo dio, acompañado de un buen abrazo, y a la manera extranjera en ambas mejillas, y luego esperó a que el vehículo arrancara y marchara haciendo ruido. Vio que doblaba la esquina, y se acercó a la farola de gas más próxima para sacar del bolsillo del chaleco la carta sellada que le había dado Schinkel.

XLV

—¿Y *madame* Grandoni? —preguntó sin querer marcharse por nada del mundo.

Estaba seguro de que no volvería a llamar a aquella puerta nunca más, y no quería dejar de ver, por última vez, a la «compañera» titular de la princesa, la señora vieja y afligida a quien siempre había querido. Siempre le había parecido ocupar la posición, un poquito ridícula, de una confidente de tragedia en quien la heroína, apoyada en una serie de reservas contrarias a la marcha del drama, había dejado de confiar.

—*E andata via, caro signorino* —dijo Assunta, sonriéndole mientras mantenía abierta la puerta.

—¿Que se ha marchado? ¡Santo Dios!, ¿cuándo se marchó?

—Hace cinco días, querido señorito. Se ha vuelto a *nuestro* hermoso país.

—¿Es posible? —Hyacinth lo sentía como una pérdida personal.

—*È possibilissimo!* —exclamó Assunta—. Había estado muchas veces a punto de irse, pero esta vez, *capisce*…

Y sin terminar la frase, aquella mujer que era la más desterrada de las romanas y la más experta de las doncellas, se entregó a un juego de expresiones sutiles, indefinibles y sugestivas, en el que las manos y los hombros tomaban tanta parte como los labios y las cejas.

Hyacinth puso toda su atención en pescar cualquier significado que la chica quisiera expresar, pero no dio muestras de haberlo entendido. Se limitó a comentar muy serio:

—En resumen que se ha marchado.

—Sí, y lo peor es que probablemente no volverá más. Aunque llevaba mucho tiempo amenazando con irse no se marchaba, pero ¡cuando por fin se decidió…! —y la mano de Assunta cortó el aire de medio lado para dar a entender la total desaparición de la señora—. *Peccato!* —concluyó con un suspiro.

—Me hubiera gustado volver a verla, me hubiera gustado decirle adiós.

Seguía allí sin saber qué hacer, aunque una vez informado de la ausencia temporal de la princesa no tenía motivos para quedarse, a no ser la posibilidad de que volviera antes de que él se marchara. Esa posibilidad era muy remota, pues eran sólo las nueve, la mitad de la noche, y demasiado pronto para que volviera si, como decía Assunta, había salido después del té. Miró a un lado y otro del Crescent, balanceando suavemente el bastón, y de pronto se dio cuenta del interés que mostraba por él su humilde amiga, la criada.

—Debería haber vuelto antes; entonces *madame* a lo mejor no se habría marchado, *povera vecchia*. Hace mucho tiempo que no venía por aquí. Ella le quería… yo lo sé.

—Me quería, pero no quería que viniese —dijo Hyacinth—. ¿No ha sido por eso por lo que se ha marchado, porque seguíamos viniendo?

—No, el otro, el de las piernas largas, sí. Pero usted es mejor.

—La princesa no lo cree así, y es a ella a quien le toca juzgar —sonrió Hyacinth.

—¡Bah!, ¿quién sabe lo que piensa? No soy yo la que tiene que decirlo. Pero sería mejor que entrase y esperara. Yo creo que no tardará, y se alegrará de verle.

—No estoy muy seguro de eso —dijo Hyacinth, y luego pregunté—: ¿Ha salido sola?

—*Sola, sola*. No tenga miedo; ha sido usted el primero. —Y Assunta, de una forma encantadora y francamente maliciosa, abrió corriendo la puerta del saloncito.

Estuvo allí cerca de una hora, sentado en la silla que ocupaba normalmente la princesa, a la luz de su lámpara, y rodeado de una docena de objetos que parecían ser una parte de ella, igual que si se tratara de los pliegues de su vestido o del tono de su voz. Sus pensamientos parecían dar chasquidos, como el hielo que había visto poner en una bebida hacía tiempo en un «bar americano», pero estaba demasiado cansado para inquietarse; no había ido al trabajo, y había andado todo el día dando vueltas para matar el tiempo; así, lo único que hacía era estar allí recostado, con la cabeza apoyada en uno de los almohadones de la

princesa, los pies en uno de sus taburetes —uno de los feos, de los que pertenecían a la casa—, y la respiración tan acelerada como la de un hombre acosado. Se sentía inquieto por su cansancio, pero no por estar esperando a la princesa; una causa de emoción más profunda se había abierto ante él, y no estaba más nervioso en ese momento de lo que lo había estado durante las veinte horas anteriores. No había cerrado los ojos en toda la noche, y el día no había compensado tampoco ese tormento. Una fiebre reflexiva se había apoderado de él, y su imaginación había abarcado muchas cosas. Le hacía dar vueltas y vueltas, en círculos de una amplitud inmensa, y por eso, mientras pensaba en tantas cosas, sentado en el sitio de la princesa, se preguntaba por qué había ido después de todo a Madeira Crescent, y qué interés podía tener en ver a la dueña de la casa. ¿No había terminado ya todo entre ellos y no estaba roto el vínculo que los había unido tan estrechamente en otro tiempo? Y no sólo porque desde hacía mucho no recibía ningún aviso ni carta de ella, ninguna invitación para que volviera o alguna pregunta para saber por qué había dejado de ir; ni siquiera por haberla visto entrar y salir con Paul Muniment y porque al príncipe Casamassima se le hubiera ocurrido comentarlo; ni tampoco porque, con total independencia de lo que dijera el príncipe, creyera que estaba mucho más absorbida en la amistad con ese extraordinario joven de lo que lo había estado nunca en sus relaciones con él. El único motivo de su acercamiento, en cuanto podía darse cuenta de ello entre el vaivén de sus meditaciones, sólo podía ser una curiosidad extraña y como ajena, extraña y ajena porque todo lo que constituía su pasado se lo había tragado el abismo abierto ante él, cuando, después de separarse de mister Vetch se había quedado junto a la farola en la callejuela de Westminster. Eso se había tragado todos sus sentimientos familiares y, sin embargo, de sus ruinas había saltado el impulso cuyo resultado era aquella vigilia.

La solución de sus dificultades —se congratulaba de haber llegado a ella— implicaba un arreglo de sus asuntos; y aun en el caso de no haber requerido solución, sintiéndose como se sentía olvidado, todavía le habría gustado decirle adiós; y por eso, en aquel momento, el deseo de ver por última vez adonde la llevaba su apresurado destino seguía teniendo un atractivo para él. Si las cosas no le habían ido bien, todavía era capaz de preguntarse si le irían mejor a ella. Se le había despertado un deseo acuciante, perverso, pero no por eso menos humano, de compadecerla. Todos esos sentimientos eran harto raros, y durante media hora se habían agolpado en su mente hasta dejarle agotado. Mientras recordaba el marco tan distinto en que la había esperado en su primera visita a South Street, cerró los ojos y se quedó medio dormido. Más tarde supuso que su inconsciencia debía de haber durado una media hora, y terminó al notar que la dueña de la casa estaba delante de él. Cuando abrió los ojos, Assunta estaba allí también y se llevaba el abrigo y el sombrero que se había quitado.

—Me encanta que hayas esperado —dijo la princesa, con la misma sonrisa de siempre—. Estás muy cansado, no te levantes; ese asiento es el más cómodo, y tienes que quedarte en él.

No le permitió levantarse; se sentó a su lado en una silla más pequeña; dijo que ella no estaba cansada; que no sabía lo que le pasaba que no se cansaba nunca, y comentó que había pasado mucho tiempo desde su última visita, como si el volver a verle se lo hubiera recordado. Insistió en que debía tomar un poco de té, pues parecía necesitarlo mucho y, después de mirarle con más atención, quiso saber qué le pasaba, qué había hecho para estar tan agotado, añadiendo luego que tenía que volver a vigilarle, porque mientras ella le había tenido a su cargo no le pasaban esas cosas. En respuesta a eso, Hyacinth hizo una gran confesión; declaró que no había ido a trabajar, y que no había hecho más que divertirse, divertirse vagando todo el día por Londres. Pero eso no daba resultado, había llegado a esa conclusión al hacerse más viejo; era señal de que pasaban los años encontrarse con que las diversiones le parecían a uno vacías, y que agarrarse a las herramientas era no sólo más provechoso, sino mucho más estimulante. Sin embargo, y por regla general, se mantenía fiel a ellas, y sin duda era esa falta de costumbre lo que hacía que el día que las dejaba le resultara más bien un chasco. Por otra parte, cuando había dejado de verla por algún tiempo, sentía siempre, al encontrarse con ella otra vez, toda la formidable impresión de su belleza, y esa noche la sentía hasta un grado extraordinario. Por espléndida que esa belleza hubiera sido siempre, brillaba en aquella ocasión como con una luz nueva, más clara y distante, como si lo que era ya de una suprema finura pudiera alcanzar un mayor refinamiento, pudiera despojarse de toda imperfección terrena y haber quedado purificada y consagrada por la nueva vida que llevaba. Su dulzura, cuando decidía emplearla, era absolutamente divina —tenía siempre el encanto de ser la humildad de un espíritu elevado— y en aquella ocasión quiso prodigarla. Ya fuera porque comprendía que era la última vez que ponía sus ojos en ella o porque ella deseara resultar especialmente agradable para compensarle de haberle olvidado últimamente entre sus otras preocupaciones —probablemente ambas cosas—, fuera lo que fuera, el simple hecho de verla, todo lo que en ella había de natural y al mismo tiempo de coercitivo, no le parecía un privilegio menor que el de haber entrado en su palco aquella noche del teatro. Tenía la impresión de que levantaba y

sostenía el peso que llevaba sobre él, como si se tratara de una cariátide alta y amable, coronada por una aplastante cornisa. Permitió que le mimara y que le sonriera lejana, aunque cariñosa, y su estado de ánimo era tal que no podía alterar su dolor ver que todas aquellas atenciones le costaban muy poco a la princesa. Había encargado a Assunta que les trajera el té y, cuando llegó la bandeja, le sirvió taza tras taza con toda la gracia de que era capaz; pero no había pasado con ella un cuarto de hora cuando comprobó que apenas se fijaba en una sola palabra de las que le decía o de las que pudiera pronunciar ella. Si, con la mejor intención, pretendía resultar «consoladora» a modo de compensación, no quedaba nada claro qué era lo que deseaba compensar. Pero había dos puntos que sí estaban perfectamente claros; primero que estaba pensando en algo que nada tenía que ver con sus relaciones presentes, pasadas o futuras con Hyacinth Robinson; segundo, que desde luego le había reemplazado. Hasta tal punto era así que ni siquiera se le ocurrió pensar lo cruel que podía resultar esa sensación de haber sido reemplazado a una persona que estaba acongojada y dolida. Si se mostraba tan encantadora con semejantes flaquezas, ¿era por ser bondadosa de natural y porque había estado alejado, pero no por haberle ofendido? Después de todo, quizá no lo hubiera hecho, porque sacó la impresión de que podía no ser una gran pérdida para nadie no formar parte de su vida íntima en aquel momento. Quedaba patente en su cara, en sus movimientos, en el tono de su voz, y en toda la irradiación de su belleza, que esa vida implicaba intimidades y esfuerzos muy arduos. Si había ido a visitarla movido por la curiosidad de ver qué tal le iba, estaba claro que le iba muy bien: vivía más que nunca entre grandes esperanzas, planes audaces y combinaciones de largo alcance. Todas esas cosas, desde su punto de vista, no eran precisamente el secreto de la felicidad, y verse mezclado en ellas no era quizá un signo de haber llevado una vida que mereciera más la pena que la terrible noción a que había llegado sobre lo que valía la paz. Ella le preguntó por qué había tardado tanto en ir a verla, pero como si se tratara sólo de un simple descuido, y tampoco dio muestras de preocuparse de si era buena o mala excusa su respuesta de que no había ido porque creía que estaba muy ocupada. Pero no negó que lo estuviera, y hasta admitió que en su vida había estado tan ocupada como entonces. Le miró como si él supiera lo que eso significaba, y Hyacinth dijo que lo sentía mucho por ella.

—¿Porque crees que todo ello es una equivocación? Sí, ya lo sé. Es posible que lo sea, pero es una equivocación magnífica. Si ya estabas asustado hace tres o cuatro meses, no sé lo que pensarías ahora si lo supieras. Lo he arriesgado todo —dijo con la mayor naturalidad—, todo.

—Afortunadamente no sé nada.

—No, claro, ¿cómo ibas a saberlo?

—Y, para decir la verdad, ese es el verdadero motivo de que no haya vuelto hasta esta noche. No he querido saber nada… he tenido miedo y horror de saber.

—¿Entonces por qué has venido al fin?

—Bueno, pues por la más absurda de las curiosidades.

—Entonces supongo que te gustaría te dijese dónde he estado esta noche, ¿no? —preguntó ella.

—No, mi curiosidad ya está satisfecha. Me he enterado de algo (lo que más me importaba saber) sin que usted me lo dijera.

Le miró un poco asombrada:

—¡Ah!, ¿quieres decir si se había ido *madame* Grandoni? Me imagino que te lo ha dicho Assunta.

—Sí, me lo ha dicho Assunta, y he sentido mucho oírlo.

La princesa se puso seria, como si la marcha de su amiga hubiera sido realmente un asunto muy penoso:

—¡Puedes imaginarte lo que lo siento! Eso me deja completamente sola; a los ojos del mundo supone una inmensa diferencia en mi posición. Por lo demás, no hago caso de los ojos del mundo, y ella ya no podía aguantarme más; parece que soy un escándalo cada vez mayor… y estaba escrito.

Al preguntar Hyacinth qué iba a hacer *madame* Grandoni, contestó:

—Supongo que se irá a vivir con mi marido. ¿Tiene gracia, no?, que tenga que estar siempre con uno de los dos y que importe tan poco con cuál de los dos sea.

Cinco minutos más tarde le preguntó si el motivo que había alegado antes era también la causa de que no fuera a Audley Court. El señor Muniment le había dicho que hacía más de un mes que no iba a verle a él ni a su hermana.

—No, no es el miedo a enterarme de algo lo que podría hacer que no me encontrase a gusto; en primer lugar, porque en cierto modo no es fácil no sentirse a gusto con Paul, y en segundo lugar que, en caso de que así fuera, él nunca permite ver qué impresión le hacen las cosas. Es, sencillamente, la sensación general de que existe una verdadera divergencia de puntos de vista. Y cuando esas divergencias se hacen muy agudas hay cosas y pretextos muy poco convincentes que…

—Que es mejor no intentar mantener. Ya veo lo que quieres decir cuando uno es ferozmente sincero.

Pero debías ir a ver a su hermana.

—No me gusta su hermana —confesó Hyacinth con toda franqueza.

—¡Ni a mí tampoco! —exclamó la princesa, mientras Hyacinth comprobaba la naturalidad y la falta absoluta de falsa vergüenza con que había hablado de su amigo común.

Pero luego no dijo nada más, y a Hyacinth le pareció que ya había estado allí bastante tiempo y que ya la había entretenido bastante. Se levantó, y estaba despidiéndose cuando ella comentó de repente:

—Por cierto, que el hecho de que no vayas a ver a un amigo como el señor Muniment porque no apruebas lo que hace me lleva a pensar que te vas a ver en una situación muy molesta, con tus desaprobaciones, el día en que te llamen para servir a la causa de acuerdo con tu juramento.

—Sí, claro que lo he pensado ya —sonrió Hyacinth.

—¿Y sería una indiscreción preguntar qué es lo que has pensado?

—¡Huy, he pensado tantas cosas, princesa! Necesitaría mucho tiempo para decirlas.

—Nunca he hablado contigo de eso, porque me parecía poco delicado, y todo ello un secreto demasiado personal para que una amiga, aunque fuera tan íntima como lo he sido yo, pretendiera meterse. Pero lo he pensado muchas veces, al ver que cada vez tienes menos interés (en el verdadero asunto, quiero decir cada vez menos), y no sé cómo vas a conciliar el cambio de tus sentimientos con la ejecución de tu compromiso. Te compadezco, pobre amigo mío —continuó conmovida—, porque no puedo imaginar una cosa más terrible que encontrarte cara a cara con tu obligación y sentir al mismo tiempo que el espíritu que te llevó a hacerlo está ya muerto dentro de ti.

—Terrible, terrible, de lo más terrible —dijo Hyacinth.

—Pero pido a Dios que no te toque nunca hacerlo. —La princesa hizo una pausa, y luego añadió—: Veo que lo comprendes. ¡Que el cielo nos ayude a todos! ¿Por qué no iba a decírtelo si me preocupa? Hace poco tiempo recibí la visita de mister Vetch.

—Fue muy amable al recibirle.

—Te aseguro que estuvo encantador. Pero ¿sabes a qué venía? Para pedirme de rodillas que te salvara.

—¿Que me salvara de qué?

—Del peligro que te amenaza. Estuvo conmovedor.

—Sí, ya me lo ha contado —dijo Hyacinth—. Se le ha metido eso en la cabeza, pero no sabe por dónde anda. ¿Y cómo creía que iba a poder salvarme?

—Eso me lo dejaba a mí; no tenía más que una idea general (y muy halagadora) del efecto que yo podía hacer sobre ti.

—¿Y creía que iba a ponerse en movimiento para evitarlo? No le hace justicia. ¡No lo haría! —sonrió Hyacinth—. En ese caso, si comparamos una posición con otra, la suya no sería mucho mejor que la mía.

—Bueno, ahora hablemos seriamente. Estoy muy tranquila por ti y por mí. Sé que no van a llamarte —contestó la princesa.

—¿Y podría preguntar cómo lo sabe?

Ella vaciló sólo un momento:

—El señor Muniment me tiene informada.

—¿Y cómo lo sabe él?

—Tenemos información. Pobre amigo mío —dijo la princesa—; estás ya tan alejado de todo que, aunque te lo dijera, me temo que no ibas a entenderlo.

—Sí, no cabe duda de que estoy alejado; pero todavía tengo derecho a decir, en contra de la acusación que me ha hecho antes, que me intereso por el «verdadero asunto» tanto como pueda haberlo hecho nunca.

—¡Ay, pobre Hyacinth!, mi querido y absurdo pequeño aristócrata, ¿te ha interesado mucho alguna vez?

—Me ha interesado lo bastante y sigue interesándome lo bastante para ofrecer de buena gana mi vida por algo que pueda ser útil de verdad.

—Sí, claro, y eres tú quien tiene que decidir lo que es eso o, más bien, lo que no es.

—No lo decidí cuando hice la promesa. Estuve de acuerdo en acatar la decisión de los demás —contestó Hyacinth.

—Hace un momento, en relación con ese asunto tuyo, decías que habías pensado muchas cosas. ¿Se te ha ocurrido por casualidad pensar algo que pudiera servirle?

—¿Que pudiera servirle a quién?

—Al pueblo.

—Me llama las cosas más asombrosas, pero se olvida de que soy uno de ellos.

—Ya sé lo que vas a decirme. Vas a decirme que lo que les vendría bien sería hacer lo que tú haces, trabajar y ganar un sueldo. Eso está muy bien siempre que funcione. Pero ¿qué les propones a los miles, a

los cientos de miles que no tienen trabajo, a todos los que pueblan la tierra y viven bajo un cielo implacable sin poder encontrarlo? Cada vez hay menos trabajo en el mundo y cada vez hay más gente para hacer el poco trabajo que hay. Todo el feroz egoísmo de unos cuantos *tiene* que venirse abajo. Y como no van a venirse abajo por su propia voluntad, hay que ayudarlos.

El tono en que había dicho esas palabras le hizo latir el corazón a toda prisa, había algo tan extraordinario en la unión de su belleza, su sinceridad y su energía, que la imagen de un heroísmo no menor pasó ante él como un relámpago, con todo el esplendor que había perdido, la idea de un riesgo tremendo y un sacrificio desinteresado.

Una mujer como aquélla, y en aquel momento, que era capaz de brillar como la plata y tener el sonido del cristal, hacía que cualquier escrúpulo, prudencia o miramiento se convirtiera en una cobardía:

—¡Qué más quisiera yo que poder verlo como lo ve usted! —dijo casi llorando, después de haberla contemplado con silenciosa admiración.

—Yo lo que veo es esto: que lo que estamos haciendo es algo que por lo menos merece la pena intentarlo, y como ninguno de los que tienen el poder, los que ocupan los puestos y tienen los medios, van a preocuparse de ninguna otra cosa, pues que caiga sobre sus cabezas la responsabilidad y que caiga la sangre sobre ellos.

—Princesa —dijo Hyacinth, con las manos juntas, y dándose cuenta de que temblaba—, queridísima princesa ¡si le pasara algo a usted…! —Pero le faltó la voz; el horror de todo ello, una docena de espantosas imágenes de lo que podía hacer y de su posible castigo, volvieron a aparecérsele como ya lo habían hecho otras veces en sus siniestras meditaciones; le parecían peor que todo lo que pudiera imaginar para sí mismo.

Ella echó la cabeza hacia atrás y le miró casi enfadada:

—¿A mí? ¿Y por qué no a mí, dime? ¿Qué títulos tengo yo que no puedan tener los otros para quedarme fuera y segura? ¿Por qué soy yo tan sacrosanta y tan preciosa?

—Sencillamente porque no hay nadie en el mundo ni podrá haberlo nunca como usted.

—¡Ay, muchas gracias! —dijo la princesa impaciente.

Y se apartó de él como con un batir de alas blancas que la sacaran del aire viciado de lo personal. Pero la llevó demasiado lejos y puso fin a su conversación; expresaba una indiferencia hacia todo lo que pudiera interesarle de ella en aquel momento y hasta un desprecio por ello, que le llevó lágrimas a los ojos. Pudo ocultarlas, porque se inclinó profundamente para besarle la mano y, después de haberlo hecho, salió de la habitación sin mirarla.

XLVI

—He recibido una carta de su marido —le dijo Paul Muniment la noche siguiente, nada más entrar en la habitación.

Hizo ese anuncio con una naturalidad tan grande y con tanta libertad, que se comprendía que su visita era una más entre las muchas que había hecho. La princesa no dejó de sorprenderse y le preguntó cómo era posible que el príncipe supiera su dirección.

—¿No podría ser por medio de su vieja amiga? —contestó Muniment—. Debe de haberla encontrado en París. Escribe desde allí.

—¡Qué sinvergüenza más incorregible! —exclamó ella.

—No veo por qué tiene que serlo por haberme escrito a mí. Tengo su carta en el bolsillo, y estoy dispuesto a enseñársela si quiere.

—Gracias, no hay nada que pueda impulsarme a tocar nada que haya tocado él.

—Pues su dinero sí que lo toca, querida señora —comentó Muniment, con la naturalidad de un hombre que ve las cosas tal como son.

La princesa lo pensó un momento:

—Sí, hago una excepción porque sé que le fastidia, que le hace sufrir.

—Pues yo habría pensado lo contrario, creí que le gustaría, al dejarle a usted en una situación de debilidad y dependencia.

—No, desde el momento que sabe que no lo empleo en mí. Lo que le exaspera es que lo dedique a fines que odia casi tanto como me odia a mí y que, sin embargo, no puede llamar egoístas.

—No la odia a usted —dijo Muniment con la misma tranquilidad, la tranquilidad de un hombre que domina no uno o dos aspectos, sino todos los que pueda presentar una cuestión—. Su carta me deja muy convencido sobre ese punto.

La princesa le miró asombrada, y preguntó adonde quería llegar, si pretendía insinuar que debía marcharse y volver a vivir con su marido.

—No sé si podría ir tan lejos como para aconsejárselo; con el beneficio que saco de verla a usted en este plan de ahora, me parece que no estaría muy bien. Pero sí me atrevería a profetizar que no tardará en irse.

—¿Y en qué se basa tan extraordinaria predicción?

—Pues en un hecho muy sencillo: que no va usted a tener de qué vivir. Se niega a leer la carta del príncipe pero, si le echara un vistazo, comprobaría en seguida lo que quiero decir. Me informa de que no necesito esperar nuevas remesas de sus manos, porque usted es la primera que no volverá a recibirlas.

—¿Y se dirige a usted en unos términos tan claros?

—Bueno, yo no puedo decir que sean muy claros, porque la carta está en francés y he tenido ciertas dificultades para entenderla, a pesar de haber perseverado en el estudio de la lengua, y de seguir el buen ejemplo del pobre Robinson. Pero ése parece ser el quid de la cuestión.

—¿Y puede repetirme a mí un insulto semejante sin descomponerse en apariencia lo más mínimo? ¡Es usted el hombre más extraordinario que he visto!

—¿Por qué va a ser un insulto? Es la pura verdad. Yo cojo el dinero que me da —dijo Muniment.

—Pero lo coge para una causa sagrada. No lo coge para usted.

—Bueno, pero el príncipe no está obligado a tenerlo en cuenta —contestó muy divertido.

La princesa hizo otra pausa:

—No sabía que estaba de su lado.

—¡Uf, ya sabe usted de qué lado estoy!

—¿Qué es lo que sabe él? ¿Qué se propone para dirigirse a usted de esa manera?

—Como le he dicho antes, supongo que lo sabe por *madame* Grandoni. Le habrá dicho que tengo una

gran influencia sobre usted.

—¡Pues no le habrá proporcionado pequeña alegría al decírselo! —comentó la princesa.

—Por lo tanto, lo que debe haber pensado es que cuando ya no tenga más dinero que darme la dejaré en paz.

—¿Nada más? ¿Cuenta que yo misma, cada uno de los latidos de mi ser y todas las cosas de que soy capaz no valen nada? —gritó la princesa con los ojos brillantes.

—Según parece, cree que eso es lo que yo hago.

—Bueno, si es por eso, ya me he dado cuenta de que usted se preocupa mucho más de mi dinero que de mí. Pero no me importa lo más mínimo.

—Pues entonces, ya ve que usted misma reconoce que el príncipe tiene razón.

—Señor mío —contestó la princesa—, mi interés por usted no ha dependido jamás del interés que pudiera sentir por mí. Dependía enteramente de la idea que tenía de que podía hacer algo importante. Supongo que lo que había empezado a decirme —añadió— es que me retira mi asignación.

—Desde primeros del mes próximo. Ha consultado con un abogado. Está claro (según me dice) que pierde el derecho a su dotación.

—¿No puedo consultar yo también? Puedo disputar hasta la última pulgada de terreno. Sólo puedo perder mis derechos a causa de algún acto que yo cometa. El acto que llevó a nuestra separación fue un acto que cometió él; me echó de su casa con violencia física.

—Ciertamente —dijo Paul, desplegando, aun para asunto tan simple, sus buenas aptitudes para la argumentación—, pero desde entonces usted sí que ha cometido algunos actos… —Calló un momento, sonriente, y continuó—: Toda su relación con una liga que trabaja por unos fines todo lo grandes que quiera, pero que forzosamente han de ser enemigos de la luz del día y de los ojos de la policía, todo eso ya es un acto; y también lo es ese ejercicio que tanto le divierte de alimentarla con el dinero sacado a una vieja familia principesca y católica. Ya sabe usted lo poco deseable que sería que todas esas cosas salieran a relucir.

—¿Y por qué necesitan salir a relucir? Alegatos, por supuesto, iba a tenerlos a montones, pero ni una sola prueba. Aun en el caso de que *madame* Grandoni testificara en contra mía, cosa que es inconcebible, no podría presentar ni un solo hecho definitivo.

—Podría presentar el hecho de que tuvo usted a un pequeño encuadernador en su casa durante un mes entero.

—¿Y eso qué tiene que ver? —contestó ella en seguida— Si se refiere a que esa circunstancia iba a dejarme en mal lugar con respecto al príncipe, ¿no tenemos por otra parte el importante detalle de que mientras nuestro amigo estuvo conmigo la propia *madame* Grandoni, persona tan sumamente respetable, no vio motivo alguno para retirarme su apoyo y protección? Además, ¿por qué no voy a poder yo tener un encuadernador lo mismo que podría tener (y seguro que el príncipe apreciaría mucho mi consideración al no tenerlos) un médico y un capellán?

—¿No soy yo su capellán? —preguntó Muniment riéndose—. ¿Y el encuadernador acostumbra a comer a la mesa con la princesa?

—¿Por qué no si es un artista? Ya sé que en otros tiempos los artistas comían con los criados, pero ahora no.

—Eso tendría que apreciarlo el tribunal —dijo él. Luego añadió—: Permítame llamar su atención sobre el hecho de que *madame* Grandoni la *ha* dejado, que le *ha* retirado su apoyo y su protección.

—¡Sí, pero no por culpa de Hyacinth! —contestó la princesa, en un tono que hubiera hecho la fortuna de una actriz si la actriz fuera capaz de imitarlo.

—Que sea por el encuadernador o por el capellán, da lo mismo. Eso no es más que un detalle. En cualquier caso, a mí no me preocuparía lo más mínimo que acudiera a los tribunales.

La princesa le contempló un rato en silencio, y por fin dijo:

—Hace un momento le hablaba de su prometedor futuro, pero de cuando en cuando hace y dice cosas que me hacen dudar de él. Es cuando da la impresión de tener miedo. Eso es algo que no cuadra en absoluto con un hombre de primer orden.

—Ya sé que me ha considerado siempre poco más que un gallina hipócrita desde el día que me conoció. Pero ¿qué importa? No tengo la menor pretensión de ser un hombre de primer orden.

—¡Es astuto y me pone de muy mal humor!

—¿No se acuerda —continuó él, sin hacer caso del sabroso comentario—, no se acuerda de que el otro día me acusó no sólo de ser cobarde, sino de ser traidor, de estar engañándola y de querer, como usted dijo, ponerme a salvo?

—Perfectamente. Me es imposible no pensar de cuando en cuando que tiene otras miras, que nadie podría calcular, y que lo único que está haciendo es aprovecharse de mí, vamos, aprovecharse de todos. Bueno, ¡no me importa!

—No, no; soy sincero —dijo Muniment simplemente, pero en un tono que podía dar a entender que la discusión era inútil. Luego hizo una transición demasiado brusca para que no resultara una grosería—. La mejor razón que puede usted encontrar en el mundo para no recurrir a la ley en contra de su marido es ésta: que cuando no le quede ni un penique tendrá que volver y vivir con él.

—¿Qué es lo que significa eso de cuando no me quede ni un penique? ¿No tengo acaso bienes propios? —preguntó la princesa.

—El príncipe me asegura que ha manejado sus bienes con tanta largueza, que sabe con toda exactitud que la renta que podría sacar de ellos no pasaría de mil francos (cuarenta libras) al año. Desde luego, con sus costumbres y sus gustos, no podrá vivir con cuarenta libras. Debo añadir que su marido parece dar a entender que sus bienes originariamente eran bastante reducidos.

—Emplea usted el tono más extraordinario —dijo ella muy seria—. Lo que parece querer decir es sencillamente esto: que desde el momento en que no tengo ya más dinero que darle, no valgo más que las hojas de té gastadas que hay en ese cacharro.

Muniment bajó la cabeza y se quedó un rato contemplando sus botas. Las palabras de la princesa le habían hecho ponerse colorado; daba la impresión de pensar que, llegada a ese punto la conversación, era más bien difícil seguir hablando. Pero levantó la cabeza, y un poco azorado, más por ella que por él, dijo:

—No tengo la menor intención de decir nada desagradable o que pueda ofenderla pero, ya que me provoca, quizá no estuviera mal decir que considero inevitable que al darnos su dinero (o más bien el de su marido) para nuestro asunto nos ha dado lo más valioso que tenía.

—¡Vaya, hoy es el día de las grandes verdades! —exclamó ella con mucha suavidad—. ¿Entonces no cuenta para nada la devoción o la inteligencia que haya podido poner a su servicio, aun tasándolas con mucha modestia?

—Tengo en cuenta su inteligencia, pero no tengo en cuenta su devoción, y no es nada la una sin la otra. No se fían de usted… no hay más diferencia que esa.

—¡No se fían! —repitió la princesa, con su soberbia mirada—. ¡Pues creía que podían ahorcarme mañana!

—Pueden perfectamente dejar que la ahorquen sin dejarla actuar. Está usted expuesta a cansarse de nosotros —añadió—; y, a decir verdad, creo que ya está cansada.

—¡*Tiene que* ser un hombre de primer orden… porque es usted una bestia! —contestó ella, que había notado, como ya lo había comprobado antes, que pronunciaba mal la palabra cansada.

—Yo no he dicho que estuviera cansada de *mí* —dijo él con cierta torpeza—. Pero no puede vivir nunca como una pobre… no sabe ni siquiera lo que eso significa.

—No, no estoy cansada de usted —declaró ella como si deseara estarlo—. Dentro de un momento me hará llorar de rabia y eso no lo ha conseguido ningún hombre desde hace años. Yo era muy pobre de niña —añadió en un tono muy distinto—. Usted mismo acaba de reconocerlo al hablar de lo insignificante que era mi fortuna.

—Para ser insignificante tenía que ser una fortuna —sonrió Muniment—. ¡Volverá con su marido!

No contestó nada a eso, pero le miró con claras muestras de estar poniéndose furiosa por momentos. Luego dijo por fin:

—Después de todo, no veo por qué se fían de usted más que de mí.

—Es que no estoy muy seguro de que lo hagan. Esta tarde he oído una cosa que parece indicarlo.

—¿Y podría saberse qué es?

—Una comunicación que yo esperaba que se hiciera a través de mí y que se ha hecho a través de otra persona.

—¿Una comunicación…?

—Sí, a Hyacinth Robinson.

—¿A Hyacinth? —La princesa se levantó de un salto; se había puesto pálida de repente.

—Ya le han dado la nota, pero no se la han dado a través de mí.

—¿Se refiere a la «llamada»? Estuvo aquí anoche —dijo la princesa.

—Un individuo, un obrero, que se llama Schinkel, es alemán (creo que no le conoce, pero fue testigo conmigo y con otro de su encargo), vino a verme esta tarde. El aviso llegó a través de él, y se lo dijo a Hyacinth el domingo por la noche.

—¿El domingo por la noche? Pero si estuvo aquí ayer, y habló de eso y no me dijo nada…

—Hizo muy bien en no decírselo. Eso demuestra el valor que tiene —contestó Muniment.

La princesa cerró los ojos un momento y, cuando volvió a abrirlos, Muniment se había levantado y estaba delante de ella:

—¿Qué es lo que quieren que haga? —preguntó.

—Yo soy como Hyacinth. Creo que haría mejor en no decírselo, al menos hasta que haya terminado.

—¿Y cuándo habrá terminado?

—Le dan varios días, y creo que instrucciones muy detalladas, aunque con notable discreción en lo que se refiere a que quiera hacerlo. Le han puesto las cosas muy fáciles. Todo eso lo sé por Schinkel, que a su vez el domingo no sabía nada, pues no era más que el tipo encargado de que lo recibiera, y que fue quien le vio ayer por la mañana.

—¿Entonces Schinkel sí se fía de usted? —preguntó la princesa.

Muniment la miró fijamente:

—Sí, pero no se fiaría de usted. Hyacinth tiene que recibir una invitación para ir a una gran casa —explicó—, una tarjeta con el nombre en blanco, para que pueda ponerlo él mismo. Sirve para dos grandes fiestas que van a celebrarse con pocos días de diferencia. Por eso le dan a él el trabajo, porque en una gran fiesta se encontrará a sus anchas.

—Pues le va a gustar mucho —dijo ella pensativa— pagarles la hospitalidad con un pistoletazo.

—Si no le gusta, no tiene obligación de hacerlo.

La princesa no contestó, pero en seguida dijo:

—Puedo enterarme fácilmente de qué sitio es ése… la gran casa donde se van a dar dos fiestas en pocos días, y en la que el dueño (¿o se trata del invitado principal?) es digno de su pólvora.

—Muy fácilmente, sin duda. ¿Y quiere prevenirle?

—No, quiero encargarme yo misma del asunto, para que no haya que dejárselo a otro. Si Hyacinth va a encontrarse a sus anchas en una gran fiesta, ¿no voy a hacerlo yo mejor todavía? Y como ya conozco al individuo podría acercarme a él sin levantar la menor sospecha.

Muniment, por un momento, pareció tomar en cuenta la proposición como si la encontrara práctica e interesante; pero luego respondió con bastante calma:

—Morir a sus manos aún sería demasiado bueno para él.

—Bueno, pero, muera como muera, ¿va a servir de algo? —preguntó la princesa.

—Vale la pena probarlo. Es un sujeto de mucho cuidado.

—¿Y no piensa ir a ver a Hyacinth?

—No, quiero dejarle en libertad.

—¡Ay, Paul Muniment, es usted un hombre de primer orden! —Se sentó en el sofá y se quedó mirándole —. ¡Por amor de Dios!, ¿por qué me ha dicho esto?

—Para que no pudiera echarme en cara más tarde que no lo hubiera hecho.

La princesa se arrojó sobre el sofá, se tapó la cara con los almohadones, y estuvo así unos minutos en silencio. Él la contemplaba sin hablar, pero por fin le dijo:

—No quiero acongojarla más, pero… ¡volverá!

Esas palabras no consiguieron ni hacerle levantar la cabeza y, pasado un momento, como si no quisiera empeorar aún más las cosas, Muniment salió de la habitación.

XLVII

Que había terminado con él para siempre fue la impresión más viva que sacó Hyacinth de su visita a Madeira Crescent. Se fue a casa y se tumbó en la cama, donde el sueño bajó una vez más a consolarle. Pero despertó al amanecer, y el comienzo de un nuevo día sirvió para reavivar su dolor. Se sentía vencido, indeciso, agotado. Recordaba cosas que le había dicho Sholto, y la compasión que *madame* Grandoni había mostrado por él desde el principio. En Paul Muniment sólo pensaba para preguntarse si lo sabría. Un tremendo deseo de hacerle justicia, por el hecho mismo de verse tentado a hacerle menos de la que merecía, le impedía afrontar a su amigo, aunque sólo fuera con la imaginación. Pensaba vagamente si le llegaría el día de verse sustituido; pero esa posibilidad se desvanecía ante una luz mucho más fuerte, la visión cegadora de algún gran papel de tribuno, que pasaba ante él de vez en cuando y que emborronaba hasta la imagen misma de la princesa. Cuando amaneció del todo se levantó, y la luz de la mañana le trajo, junto con una inquietud que le impedía quedarse en la habitación, el principio de una pregunta que había quedado sin respuesta: «¿Después de todo, después de todo…?», una pregunta que la princesa había dejado allí la noche anterior al hablar con tanta valentía en nombre de la Revolución. «Después de todo, después de todo, puesto que no se intentaba nada ni parecía que fuera a intentarse…». Tenía la sensación de que su espíritu, decidido según creía, iba a volver a derrumbarse; pero a su vez esa sensación se transformaba en un estremecimiento que ya le era familiar, el horror de que en su persona reaparecieran otra vez en público las empapadas manos de su madre. Ese odio a la idea de que pudiera producirse una *repetición* no había sido muy fuerte, aunque pareciera extraño, hasta el momento de sentir el peso de la mano en su hombro; en todas sus meditaciones anteriores la repugnancia creciente a actuar para el «partido de acción» no provenía del miedo a una deshonra personal, sino de una observación cada vez más anhelante. Pero la idea de una deshonra personal le hacía sufrir muchísimo; parecía ser suficiente para hacer imposible el trabajo. Pasaba ante él, o más bien permanecía, como un golpe dado otra vez a su madre, ya terriblemente desfigurada; permitir que pasara otra vez a primer plano en la vida de su hijo era en cierta manera volver a poner ante los ojos del mundo su deshonra olvidada. La idea que más se repetía en su mente era que tenía tiempo, tenía tiempo; y se sentía agradecido, veía un detalle de delicadeza y de piedad en que le dejaran un margen, que no le condenaran a verse acuciado por el tiempo. Tenía otro día, dos días, podía tomarse tres, hasta podía tomarse varios días. Sabía que iba a estar cansadísimo de ellos antes de que pasaran, pero podía hacer que pasaran en cuanto quisieran.

Volvió a salir a las calles, a las plazas, a los parques, empujado por un inútil deseo de sumergirse otra vez en la ciudad grande e indiferente, que tan bien conocía y a la que amaba tanto, y que guardaba tantas de sus sonrisas, sus lágrimas y confidencias. El día era gris y húmedo, pero no llovía, y Londres nunca le había parecido llevar con tanto orgullo y tan públicamente el sello de su historia imperial. Pasó despacio una y otra vez por el puente de Westminster, y se paró a contemplar las grandes barcazas que navegaban por el río, grande y turbio; miró el enorme palacio que se alzaba allí como una fortaleza del orden social y que él, nuevo David, estaba encargado de atacar con piedra y honda. Por último se dirigió a Saint James Park, anduvo vagando por él, y acabó sentándose. Contempló los cisnes, casi fascinado, y la calle principal que lo comunica con Pimlico. Se paró y volvió otra vez para atrás; luego, sin dejar la calle, desanduvo lo andado para dirigirse al oeste. Miró los escaparates de las tiendas, sobre todo las grandes vidrieras del establecimiento en que a esa hora del día Millicent Henning desempeñaba sus importantes funciones. Su imagen se le había aparecido al salir, y la llevaba siempre delante, se aferraba a él, se negaba a dejarle. La verdad es que tampoco se esforzaba en apartarla; él también se aferraba a ella, y sentía que le murmuraba cosas extrañas al oído. Le había proporcionado tanta alegría el domingo; era una naturaleza tan fuerte y tan simple, tenía un pecho generoso, y estaba absolutamente libre de todos los engaños de la civilización. Todo lo que siempre le había gustado de ella se le presentaba envuelto en una mayor delicadeza, y hubo un

momento, mientras estaba parado en el puente que se tiende sobre el lago del parque, absorto aparentemente en contemplar las cabriolas que hacía un pollino en una barcaza, en el que se preguntó si, en el fondo, no había sido ella la que le había gustado más. Intentaba creer que había sido así, quería creer que había sido así, y le parecía ver los ojos que pondría ella si le jurara que así había sido. Algo de eso había pasado ya entre ellos el domingo, pero todo lo que vino después se lo había llevado por delante. Pero el sabor del contento vago y sencillo que le había proporcionado el domingo revivía otra vez, y se preguntaba si podría volver a probarlo de nuevo y de una forma más profunda. Después de haber pensado que ya no podía desear nada, se encontraba con que deseaba creer que Millicent podía hacer algo por él. ¿No podría ayudarle, no podría hasta sacarle del apuro? Estaba mirando un escaparate —no el de la tienda de ella— cuando se le presentó la imagen de una escapada con ella, sin motivo definido y a un lugar no determinado; y se alegró en aquel momento de estar de espaldas a la gente, porque notó que de repente se ponía colorado hasta las orejas. Una y otra vez, a pesar de todo, volvía a pensar que las personas espontáneas y poco educadas tienen muchas veces momentos de inspiración, recursos inesperados. Además, los tuviera Milly o no, podía al menos sentir otra vez la rotundidad de sus brazos que le rodeaban. No sabía muy bien qué beneficio iba a proporcionarle eso ni qué puerta iba a abrirle, pero sí sabía que iba a gustarle. No podía permitirse demorar esa sensación, pero tampoco disfrutarla hasta última hora de la tarde. Él lo había dejado todo, ella estaría ocupada todo el día; pero siempre sería algo, una especie de anticipación, verla antes, poder decirle unas palabras. Luchó contra la tentación de entrar en la tienda, porque sabía que no le gustaba, ya lo había intentado otra vez; las visitas de los caballeros, aunque fueran compradores ostensibles (había gente encargada de vigilar y decir quién era cada uno), la comprometían a los ojos de sus jefes. Claro que aquel no era un caso corriente y, aunque anduvo por allí mucho tiempo, sin acabar de decidirse, molesto y casi avergonzado, terminó al fin por entrar, como empujado por la sola, la última, dolorosa necesidad personal que le quedaba. No haría más que quedar con ella, y una mirada y una sola palabra serían suficientes.

Recordaba el camino a través del laberinto de la tienda; sabía que su departamento estaba en el piso de arriba. Paseó por los almacenes, que estaban atestados, como si tuviera el mismo derecho a hacerlo que cualquier otra persona; y, como al levantarse se había entretenido en ponerse su traje de fiesta, que le sentaba tan bien, nadie sospechó que llevara un propósito más nefando que el de buscar algo bonito para regalárselo a una mujer. Subió y se encontró en una sala grande donde se vendían artículos manufacturados, y donde, aunque había más de veinte personas, le bastó una mirada para comprender que no iba a encontrar a Millicent. Quizá estuviera en la de al lado, a la que pasó por una amplia abertura. Allí había también numerosos compradores, en su mayoría señoras; los hombres eran sólo tres o cuatro, y la venta estaba totalmente encomendada a chicas jóvenes, vestidas de negro y con largas colas. Al principio le pareció que la chica que él buscaba tampoco se hallaba allí, y estaba ya a punto de marcharse para mirar en otro sitio, cuando vio a un hombre alto, de pie en medio de la sala, y que no era otro que el capitán Sholto. En seguida comprendió que la persona que estaba delante del capitán, quieta como una estatua, y con la espalda vuelta hacia él, era el objeto de sus pesquisas. A pesar de no verle la cara, «identificó» a Millicent inmediatamente; reconoció su actitud de tienda, el peinado que llevaba, y las largas líneas de su figura adornadas con la última novedad. Estaba enseñándole aquel tesoro al capitán, que se había quedado extasiado. Ya había estado antes allí con Hyacinth como comprador de pega, pero imitaba a uno de verdad mucho mejor que él, mientras recorría con los ojos la persona de su amiga, los entornaba para apreciarla, y se frotaba despacio el labio inferior con el puño del bastón. Millicent se mantenía asombrosamente quieta, y el aspecto posterior del vestido que lucía era soberbio. Hyacinth, durante un minuto, se quedó tan quieto como ella. Pasado ese minuto comprendió que Sholto le había visto, y le pareció que estaba a punto de hacer que Millicent también le viera. Pero Sholto se limitó a mirarle muy fijo unos segundos, y no le dijo que estaba allí; para darse ese gusto esperaría a que el intruso se marchara. Hyacinth le devolvió a su vez la mirada —lo que los ojos de los hombres se dijeron quizá no requiera explicación— y se marchó.

Esa misma noche, a eso de las nueve, la princesa Casamassima llegaba en un coche a la casa de Hyacinth, en Westminster. La puerta de la casa estaba entreabierta, y había un hombre delante de ella, fumando una enorme pipa y mirando a un lado y a otro. La princesa, al verle de lejos, había tenido la esperanza de que fuera Hyacinth, pero resultó ser un tipo muy distinto a su incondicional amigo. No es que tuviera muy mal aspecto, pero la miró de una forma muy directa cuando ella bajó del coche y se acercó a la puerta. Estaba ya acostumbrada a las miradas más groseras y no le dio importancia; imaginó que sería uno de los inquilinos de la casa. Se apartó un poco para dejarla pasar, y se quedó mirándola mientras trataba de imprimirle un poco de vida al cordón que colgaba a un lado de la puerta. Como no dio respuesta alguna, le dijo:

—Deseo preguntar por el señor Hyacinth Robinson. Quizá pueda usted decirme…

—Sí, yo también —contestó con una extraña sonrisa—. También he venido para eso.

Pareció extrañarse de verle:

—Creo que será el señor Schinkel. He oído hablar de usted.

—Me conoce por lo mal que hablo el inglés —dijo su interlocutor, con una sombra de amable coquetería.

—Su inglés es excelente. Ya quisiera yo hablar el alemán tan bien. No tiene más que un poquito de acento y, desde luego, un vocabulario estupendo.

—Creo que yo también he oído hablar de usted —dijo Schinkel con notable libertad.

—Sí, en nuestro círculo nos conocemos todos, ¿no? Somos todos como hermanos.

La princesa estaba nerviosa, excitadísima, pero aún podía disfrutar aquel número de encontrarse en una especie de suburbio y fraternizando con un tipo que parecía un caballo domado al que le molestara el freno:

—Entonces espero que esté en casa. ¿Bajará a verle?

—Eso es lo que no sé. Estoy esperando.

—¿Han ido a avisarle?

Schinkel la miró, mientras daba chupadas a la pipa:

—Ya le he dado la lata, pero no quiere decir nada.

—¿Cómo que no quiere decir nada?

—Tiene cerrada la puerta. He llamado muchas veces.

—Pues será que está fuera —dijo la princesa.

—Sí, puede que esté fuera —admitió Schinkel, imparcial.

Estuvieron un momento mirándose, y la princesa preguntó:

—¿Tiene alguna duda sobre eso?

—*Oh!, es kann sein*. Sólo que la encargada de la casa me dijo hace cinco minutos que había venido.

—Pues habrá vuelto a salir.

—Sí, pero ella no le ha oído.

La princesa se dio cuenta de que estaba poniéndose colorada. Sabía lo mismo que Schinkel sobre la situación actual de su amigo, y deseaba ser muy clara con él y que él lo fuera también con ella. Al mismo tiempo se sentía más bien desconcertada al ver que él se mostraba cauto, nada más que cauto. Era educado e inescrutable, como algunos de los grandes personajes —embajadores y ministros— que ella solía encontrar en el gran mundo:

—¿La mujer no se ha movido de la casa en todo este tiempo?

—Sí, salió hace media hora y volvió a los diez minutos.

—Pues debe de haber vuelto a salir en este momento.

—Eso he pensado yo. Por eso he esperado aquí —dijo Schinkel—. No tengo nada que hacer —añadió con toda tranquilidad.

—Yo tampoco —contestó ella—. Podemos esperar juntos.

—Es una lástima que no tenga algún sitio más cómodo —comentó el alemán con simpatía.

—No, basta con éste. Así lo veremos antes cuando vuelva.

—Sí, pero a lo mejor tarda.

—No me importa; esperaré. Espero que no le moleste mi compañía —sonrió ella.

—Está muy bien, está muy bien —respondió Schinkel entre sus humos.

—Entonces voy a despedir el coche.

Fue hacia él y pagó al cochero, que contestó muy expresivo:

—Gracias, señora.

—Le ha dado usted demasiado —comentó Schinkel al volver ella.

—Tenía aspecto de ser buen hombre. Estoy segura de que se lo merecía.

—Es muy caro —continuó Schinkel con la misma amabilidad.

—Sí, y yo no tengo dinero… pero ya está hecho. ¿No había nadie en la casa cuando salió la mujer?

—No, la gente está fuera; sólo tiene hombres solteros. Se lo pregunté. Tiene una hija, pero la hija ha ido a ver a su prima. La madre fue ahí al lado, poco más allá de la esquina, a comprar un poco de leche. Cerró la puerta y se metió la llave en el bolsillo; estuvo en la tienda de comestibles, donde había ido por la leche, hablando con una amiga que se encontró allí. Ya sabe que las mujeres tienen costumbre de hacerlo, *nicht wahr?* Yo vine media hora después. Me dijo que estaba en casa y subí a su cuarto. Bajé y volví a hablar con ella, y me contó lo que le he dicho.

—Y entonces decidió usted esperar, como he hecho yo —dijo la princesa.

—Sí, quiero verle.

—Yo también, me interesa mucho. —Estuvo un momento callada y luego añadió—: Creo que deseamos verle por el mismo motivo.

—*Das kann sein, das kann sein*.

Los dos siguieron de pie, en la oscuridad de la noche, e intercambiaron algunas palabras más, todas ellas sin importancia. Pasados diez minutos, la princesa le dijo en voz baja, poniéndole la mano en el brazo:

—Señor Schinkel, esto no marcha. Yo no puedo aguantar más.

—Sí, es lo que suele pasarles a las señoras —contestó el alemán muy juicioso.

—Quiero subir a su cuarto —dijo la princesa—. Tenga la bondad de decirme cuál es.

—No servirá de nada si no está allí.

—Es que no estoy segura de que no esté.

—Bueno, pero si no contesta es que prefiere no tener visitas.

—Es posible que le guste más recibirme a mí que recibirle a usted —sugirió ella con toda franqueza.

—*Das kann sein, das kann sein*. —Pero Schinkel no hizo movimiento alguno para hacerla entrar en la casa.

—Esta noche no hay nada… ya sabe lo que quiero decir —comentó, sin dejar de mirarle.

—¿Que esta noche no hay nada?

—En casa del duque. La primera reunión es el jueves, y la otra el próximo martes.

—*Schön*, —dijo Schinkel—. Yo nunca voy a ninguna reunión.

—Ni yo tampoco.

—Claro que *ésta* es una especie de reunión… usted y yo —dijo con una sonrisa espantosa.

—Sí, y parece que a la dueña de la casa no le gusta.

Los pasos de una celosa patrona empezaban a oírse en el corredor, a través de la puerta abierta, que cerraron desde dentro con un golpazo de desaprobación. Algo que notó en ese ruido pareció avivar de un modo insoportable la impaciencia y el miedo de la princesa. El peligro de verse rechazada le hacía desear más que nunca conseguir lo que había ido a buscar:

—¡Por amor de Dios, señor Schinkel, acompáñeme arriba! Si no lo hace, subiré yo sola.

Se había quedado pálida, y no es necesario decir que estaba hermosísima. El alemán se dio cuenta y, sin decir una palabra, volvió a abrir la puerta y entró, seguido de cerca por la princesa.

En la parte de abajo había una luz que mitigaba la oscuridad de la escalera… hasta el primer piso; todo lo demás estaba tan oscuro, que los dos subían despacio y Schinkel daba la mano a la princesa. Al volver el segundo tramo de la escalera, se le escapó un grito:

—¡Santo Dios!, ¿es ésa su puerta, la que tiene luz?

—Sí, puede verla por debajo. Ya había luz antes —dijo sin perder la calma.

—¿Y cómo no se le ha ocurrido decírmelo?

—Porque pensé que iba a ponerse nerviosa.

—¿Y a *usted* no le pone nervioso?

—Un poco, pero no hago caso —confesó Schinkel—. Es muy posible que se la haya dejado encendida.

—¡No se deja velas encendidas! —contestó ella impaciente.

Subió corriendo los escalones que quedaban y, al llegar, se paró delante de la puerta, con el oído pegado a ella. Agarró el picaporte y lo movió, pero la puerta no se abría. Gritó, jadeando, a su acompañante:

—¡Tenemos que entrar, tenemos que entrar!

—Pero ¿qué quiere que hagamos si está cerrada?

—Tendrá que saltar la cerradura.

—Resulta muy caro —dijo Schinkel.

—¡Venga, no sea tan miserable! —gritó la princesa—. En una casa como ésta las cerraduras son una porquería; se rompen a la primera.

—¿Y si no está ahí, vuelve y ve lo que hemos hecho?

Le miró un momento en la oscuridad, mitigada sólo por la poca luz que salía de la rendija:

—¡Está ahí! ¡Puedo jurar que está ahí!

—*Schon, schon* —dijo su amigo, como si empezara a contagiársele el miedo, pero estuviera deliberando y no quisiera perder la calma.

Ella le aseguró que con dos o tres empellones fuertes que diera con el hombro haría saltar la cerradura, que no sería más que un triste pedazo de hojalata, y se apartó para dejarle paso. Él se acercó, y se apoyó contra la puerta, pero sin dar ningún golpe, mientras la princesa esperaba con la mano en el corazón. Schinkel parecía seguir deliberando. Por fin dio un suspiro:

—Sé que le encuentran la pistola; no es más que por eso —murmuró.

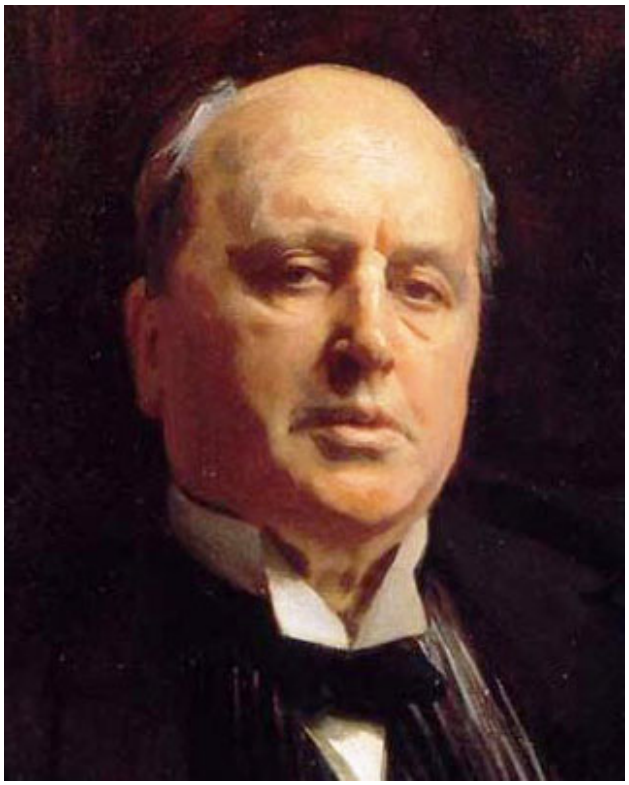
Un momento después vio que se balanceaba para tomar impulso. Oyó un crujido y vio que la cerradura había saltado. La puerta se hizo pedazos: habían pasado a la luz; estaban en un cuarto pequeño que parecía lleno de cosas. No había más que una vela encima de la chimenea, y la luz era tan pobre que en el primer momento no pudo distinguir nada. Pero antes de que pasara ese momento, sus ojos se habían fijado en la cama. Había algo encima de ella, algo negro, incierto, una cosa tendida. Schinkel trató de detenerla, pero sólo fue un instante; lo vio todo y, al hacerlo, se lanzó hacia la cama y cayó de rodillas junto a ella. Hyacinth yacía allí como si estuviera dormido, pero había algo horrible, un amasijo sanguinolento en la colcha, en el costado, sobre el pecho. El brazo colgaba a un lado, fuera de la cama; tenía la cara blanca y los ojos cerrados. Todo eso pudo ver Schinkel, pero sólo un momento; la princesa se arrojó sobre el cuerpo, con un movimiento convulsivo y un grito ronco y extraño. Schinkel buscó el arma, la pistola, pero, al lanzarse sobre la cama, ella la había empujado con las rodillas.

—Es una pena que la encontraran… si no la hubieran encontrado… —le dijo a ella en voz muy baja.

Estaba decidido a conservar la calma; por eso, al volverse ante la llegada de la dueña de la casa, que había subido corriendo, pálida y despavorida al oír que reventaban la puerta, pudo decir, muy serio y tranquilo:

—El señor Robinson se ha pegado un tiro en el corazón. Debe de haberlo hecho mientras usted iba a buscar la leche.

La princesa se levantó al oír entrar a otra persona en el cuarto, y Schinkel pudo ver entonces el pequeño revólver, que estaba debajo de la cama. Lo cogió, y lo puso con todo cuidado encima de la chimenea, guardándose para sí, con idéntica prudencia, la idea de que habría sido mucho mejor que estuviera destinado al duque.



HENRY JAMES nació el 15 de abril de 1843 en Nueva York, en el seno de una acomodada familia de origen irlandés.

Cursó sus primeros estudios en distintas ciudades de Europa: Londres, París, Ginebra. En 1862, en Estados Unidos, inició la carrera de Derecho en la Universidad de Harvard, actividad que combinaba con la publicación de relatos en distintas revistas literarias.

En 1875, James se estableció en Inglaterra, con poco más de 30 años, y en 1915 obtuvo la nacionalidad inglesa. Sus novelas, relatos y ensayos revelan los contrastes entre ambos mundos. Novelista, dramaturgo y crítico, ha influido de manera decisiva en el desarrollo de la novela moderna tanto en su país de origen, como en la literatura universal.

Henry James murió el 28 de febrero de 1916, en su casa de campo de Rye, Sussex, dejando un exquisito legado a la historia de la literatura tras más de 50 años de carrera literaria: 20 novelas, 112 relatos y 12 obras de teatro, además de diversas críticas literarias y teatrales.

Su estilo, que se caracteriza por la descripción psicológica de los personajes, adquirió con el tiempo una gran elegancia y complejidad, oculta tras argumentos aparentemente sencillos. La perspicaz penetración psicológica en el mundo interior de sus personajes lo ha encumbrado como uno de los más exquisitos maestros del monólogo interior.